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SCARLETT  
SCOTT

*The Wicked Winters*



Wooded  
in  
Winter

# **Woody in Winter**

**The Wicked Winters Book Seven**

By  
Scarlett Scott

The Marquess of Haven has finally decided to do his duty and settle upon a bride, preferably before the new year begins. What better place to find her than a country house party? There's just one problem. The beautiful widow who once owned his heart is also in attendance. Surely there's no harm in indulging in one night of passion with her, just to get her out of his mind. But Haven is about to discover old habits are hard to break, especially when the consequences last forever...

Dear reader,

A previous edition of *Woored in Winter* originally appeared in the limited time set *Lords, Ladies and Babies*. This edition has been expanded to include never before published bonus content. I hope you enjoy Hannah and Graham!

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## Chapter One



*Now*

*Oxfordshire, 1813*

THE MARQUESS OF Haven could tie leaden weights about his ankles and go swimming in the Serpentine for all she cared.

At least, that was what Hannah thought when she saw him again for the first time since he had broken her heart.

The second thing was...

"What in the name of heaven is he doing here?" one of her sisters whispered.

"I was wondering precisely the same thing myself," Hannah told her. "You must not look at him, Evie."

"*You* are looking at him," Evie pointed out wryly.

*Yes, drat it all.* She was. And she had to stop. At once.

But before she could, his gaze slammed into hers. They were on opposite ends of the massive Abingdon House ballroom. And still, she felt the shock of his stare as if he had touched her. As if time had never intervened. She inhaled against a sharp surge of memory, anguish, resentment.

Above all, anger.

Yet somehow also, the glimmers of foolish yearning still burned alongside those other flames, like hot coals about to rekindle into flame.

*No.* She must not think that. Nor must she think of him. *Graham.* He had not always been Lord Haven. Once, he had been hers. Or so she had recklessly believed...

Hannah jerked her eyes from him, turning her attention to her sisters as she struggled to maintain her composure. She was far wiser than she had been the last time she had seen the marquess. She was more experienced. More worldly.

*Bitter and widowed.*

She chased the unwanted acknowledgment from her mind. For yes, she was those things as well. The first thanks to Haven and her former husband both, and the last thanks only to her former husband. If Fawkesbury had not already been buried in his family plot, she would have urged him to accompany Haven in his swimming endeavors. Complete with the leaden weights.

Perhaps with an extra set tied to his neck.

"Hannah, are you well?" her other sister Adele asked, her countenance creased with worry.

No, she was not.

"Yes, of course." She pinned a false smile to her lips. "I have never been happier, darling."

"You do not look happy," Evie observed. "You look rather ill."

She had agreed to attend this Christmas country house party, being held by Lady Emilia Winter and her new husband, Mr. Devereaux Winter, to chaperone her twin sisters Evie and Addy. They were six years her junior and in desperate need of husbands, their mama feared, lest they ruin themselves as Hannah had done. But when Mama had rushed home to Cornwall to look after her own ailing mother, Hannah had been charged with the most unwanted task of playing escort to Evie and Addy.

Not unwanted because she did not love her sisters, but unwanted because Hannah did not often mix with society. Indeed, had she known Lord Haven would be present, she would not have come at all.

But she was here now.

And so was he.

"Hannah?" Adele prodded.

Her traitorous gaze had stolen across the ballroom to Lord Haven once more.

She jerked her eyes back to her sister. "Lady Emilia seems happy, do you not think, sisters?" she asked, deliberately changing the subject.

Lady Emilia, who had once been betrothed to their cousin. At the remembrance of her dear cousin James, Hannah's heart gave a pang. For he had been a god among men. Kindhearted, loyal, and true. Gone far too soon.

"She is in love," Evie observed with a sigh.

"If such a state indeed exists," Adele added. "I strongly suspect it does not."

Love, for Hannah, had been nothing but a fiction. A cleverly crafted illusion, which had led to her stunning downfall.

"Some believe so," Hannah said reluctantly, fanning herself. Truly, it was not her task to disenchant her sisters. She hoped a much better fate awaited them in their marriages than she had found in her own.

The ballroom was quite a crush, and surely that was the reason for the heat in her cheeks. It had nothing at all to do with the Marquess of Haven.

The man she had loved, once upon a time.

The man who had scorned her and made a fool of her.

The man she would never, ever forgive.

“He is a dashing fellow, too, do you not think?” Evie asked.

“He is not at all dashing.” She frowned. “Not unless one finds heartless cads and cruel scoundrels alluring.”

Evie raised a brow. “I was speaking of Mr. Winter, Hannah.”

*Oh.*

Further agitated, she whipped her fan again. “He seems a most considerate man in relation to Lady Emilia, though we have not had occasion to speak much since her nuptials.”

Lady Emilia’s wedding had been sudden and unexpected. And Hannah had been in the country at the time, where she generally preferred to be, busying herself with Mama. Poking about in Papa’s library. Distracting herself from London. Hiding, in truth.

From her past and everyone in it.

Which made the appearance of Lord Haven, on the other side of the room, all the more disconcerting.

“Hannah, are you certain you are well?” Evie asked, concern threading her voice. “I am promised for the next dance, but I do not wish to leave you in such a state.”

“What state?” She fanned herself, stretching her false smile even wider. “We are here for *you*, my dearest sisters. Do not concern yourself with me. I shall be fine, just as I have always been.”

As if on cue, Lord Denton and Lord Foy approached. Both were handsome and young, cutting fashionable figures.

The gentlemen bowed.

Denton was first to speak. “Lady Fawkesbury, Lady Evangeline, Lady Adele.”

Evie was still frowning at Hannah, paying little attention to her prospective suitor. *Go* she mouthed surreptitiously to her sister as she dipped into a curtsy. “Lord Denton. Lord Foy.”

Evie presented a passable curtsy as well. Adele’s was less than elegant. Hannah made a note to discuss her sisters’ forms with them later.

“I believe the next dance is mine,” Denton said to Evie.

“Yes it is,” Evie agreed, giving Hannah one last, lingering look.

“Lady Adele.” Foy extended his arm.

Addy, too, searched Hannah’s gaze, the sadness that had been her younger sister’s accompaniment ever since their departure from London seemingly more pronounced.

This house party was about her sisters, who were just beginning their lives.

Not about her. Not about her feelings. Not about her dreaded past.

To the devil with Lord Haven. She could exist beneath the same



roof as he for a few weeks. She would simply ignore him. Feign indifference. Pretend she had never known him. Never loved him.

God, what a fool she was. Not even she believed her own inner reassurances.

Hannah watched her sisters being swept to the dance floor, and she had to admit they looked a matched pair with their beaux. Lord Denton's golden hair was the same shade as Evie's. Evie was petite, scarcely reaching his shoulders. Lord Foy was dark-haired and dark-eyed as Adele was. Her twin sisters were opposites in appearance and temperament. But both beloved to her.

The orchestra struck up the strains of a country reel, and she forced herself to observe for another moment before taking the opportunity to flee. She was overheated. And she needed a minute to regain her composure. Perhaps two. Certainly no more than three. Though the December air was unseasonably cold, the immense garden of Abingdon House beckoned, just beyond the doors of the ballroom.

Without thought, she quit the room. She did not dare set her eyes upon *him* again.

She would carry on, as she always had done. She would do so for her sisters' sakes. And that of her pride. She would simply pretend he was not here. That he did not exist.

She firmly ignored any voice to the contrary as she swept into the cold night air.



SHE WAS HERE.

*Han.*

*Hannah.*

*Lady Fawkesbury now*, Graham reminded himself, the thought like a stab to his gut.

For five years, he had managed to avoid her, though memories of her continued to plague him. She had buried herself in the country with Fawkesbury. She had been beyond reach and out of sight, but she had never been far from his mind.

Indeed, her mere appearance here, in Oxfordshire, at the country house party he was attending in an effort to do his bloody duty to the line and obtain a bride made him wonder if he had conjured her. How odd was it—nay, how impossible—that the only woman he had ever wanted to marry should appear when he had finally decided to take a wife?

*Impossible*, said a voice deep inside himself.

And yet, it was true. She had come. She was *here*. In the same house, beneath the same roof. Closer than she had ever been in years.

Their gazes had fleetingly met across the sea of merrymakers, clashing. He had lost his breath. His heart had hammered faster than the hooves of a runaway stallion pounding over the earth.

He despised his reaction to her.

The way it had all come rushing back to him. One look was all it had required. And he could envision the sensation of her velvet-smooth skin beneath his questing fingertips. He could hear her sweet gasp of pleasure. He could feel her body under his, giving, surrendering, fooling him into believing she would be his only.

His always.

She had never been his.

Graham's fists were balled at his sides, and he realized, quite belatedly, he was clenching his jaw with so much force, it ached. He took a breath. Then another.

*By God*, he needed a drink.

"Bloody hell, Haven, you look as if you have just seen a ghost," observed his friend, Lord Percival Vale.

Percy, like, Graham, had been born a second son. Unlike Graham, however, Percy's brother, the wastrel Duke of Bellingham, was still very much alive. Gervase was not so fortunate, and neither was Graham. The Haven marquissate was a curse and a burden, and Graham had damn well never wanted it.

"I *have* seen a specter of sorts," he forced himself to say. "Are they serving anything aside from orgeat and negus? Something stronger, perhaps?"

It had taken less than a minute to alter his life. With Gervase's fall from a horse five years ago, Graham had become Marquess of Haven. But each time someone referred to him as Haven, he felt a horrible ache. A hot spear of anguish, knowing his brother was forever gone. That Graham himself was nothing but a usurper.

"I believe there are some brandy stores in the library," Percy observed drily. "Shall we reconnoiter there and see if we can liberate some?"

"Not just yet," he found himself saying, his gaze traveling, inevitably, back to Hannah.

He wished he could say the last five years had been unkind to her. She was still the most haunting beauty he had ever beheld. Her golden hair, which he knew possessed a natural curl and felt like spun silk sifting through his fingers, was lustrous as ever beneath the blazing light of the chandeliers. She looked slimmer than he recalled. It appeared as if she were playing the role of shepherdess for her twin sisters, hovering over them as two suitors approached.

"Are you acquainted with Lady Fawkesbury, old chap?" Percy asked, dragging Graham's gaze away from her once more.

He wished he could unsee her.

Unlove her.

He wished he could stop his foolish, useless heart from pounding so damn hard.

"I was," he clipped, frowning at his friend to discourage further discussion of her. "Her brother was an old Eton friend. Our families were...familiar."

And *good God*, how familiar he had been with her. He still recalled every detail: the birthmark on her hip, the sweet scent of lavender on her skin, the feeling of being deep inside her.

"She is widowed." Once more, Percy's voice dragged Graham back from the craggy cliffs of the past. "There is something delightfully luscious about a lonely woman of experience."

Graham ground his molars. Percy was a flirt and a skirt hound, it was true. The notion of his friend chasing after Hannah was enough to make his stomach curdle.

"Not this one," he managed, pleased with himself for how calm his voice sounded, quite the opposite of the raging fury teeming within. "She is a cunning jade. You would do best to keep your distance."

"It sounds as if you were more than acquainted with the lady in question." Percy eyed him shrewdly, too intelligent not to sense there was more to his story.

But he was not in the mood for sharing the jagged pieces of his past.

Not today.

Not ever.

A new song began to play. A country reel of some sort. His eyes, *curse them*, had once more strayed to Hannah. Her sisters were being led away from her side, to the dance floor. And she was moving. Striding with haste, her expression pinched.

Almost as if she were in pain.

"She has a reputation," he said curtly. "That is all. Keep your distance from her."

"Warning received, old chap," Percy said.

Had he been warning his friend away from her? *Lord in heaven*, what a fool he was. His eyes were still following her as she slipped to the doors that had been propped open to allow some cold winter's air into the room. Between the chandeliers blazing and the crush of dancers, the room was quite stuffy and warm. Even so, she did not have a wrap.

She would take a chill.

He told himself he did not give a damn. That the weather outside was as frigid as her black heart.

He told himself he was not going to follow her into the garden, into the moonlight.

But he had always been a horrible, bloody liar.

“Excuse me, Percy. I need to take the air for a moment,” he told his friend just as the last flash of Hannah’s gown disappeared into the waiting night.

Without waiting for a response from his friend, he stalked after her. He had ever been like the drunk, craving his next tippie from the bottle, when it came to Hannah Spencer. Just like her beauty, his longing for her had failed to fade.

*Damn it all.*

And damn her, too.

## Chapter Two



*Then  
London*

THERE WERE ANY number of suitable bachelors on the marriage mart this Season.

*You are newly comeout*, Mama had cautioned. *Do not set your cap upon a gentleman yet.*

But her mother's admonitions mattered not. Hannah had already chosen the man she wanted to marry long ago. Nothing would sway her from her course.

Lord Graham Dowling.

Friend to her brother Maximilian. Trusted family acquaintance. Second son of the Marquess of Haven. Tall, handsome, elegant Corinthian.

Hers.

At least, she *hoped* he would be hers. First, he had to notice her. Tonight, this ball, she would finally make Lord Graham see she was the lady for him. Her gown was impeccable—fine muslin, embroidered around the hem with roses, capped with sleeves of lace. Her curls were styled with a golden tiara. The knowledge he would be in attendance had been her motivation as she prepared her *toilette* for the evening.

Unlike the crop of boring fêtes she had attended thus far, Lord Graham's attendance was assured. He would never miss one of Mama's balls. Beneath the warmth of the burning chandeliers, the elegant crush assembled glittered. Mama had outdone herself this evening, the ballroom bursting to life with hundreds of sweetly scented flowers. The air was magical, like a fairy garden come to life.

And Hannah could not shake the feeling this would be the night Lord Graham fell in love with her. It had to be. She could not bear any more waiting. No other man would do.

She waited—surrounded by two hundred fifty guests she had no wish to see—for him. She danced. She flirted. She smiled.

At last, her brother and his friend stood before her. Hannah had eyes only for Lord Graham. She drank in his auburn hair, his blue stare, high cheekbones, his perfectly sculpted lips.

He bowed with an elegance that was poetic. She dipped into a

curtsy.

"Lady Hannah," he said softly.

"Lord Graham," she returned, her voice shy.

Did she imagine a tenderness in his tone when he spoke to her? Did his gaze linger on her mouth a moment longer than proper?

"...quite a crush this evening." The end of Maximilian's words belatedly pierced the Lord-Graham-induced fog inhabiting Hannah's mind.

She forced herself to look away, to settle her stare upon her brother instead. He was dressed in the height of fashion, much like Lord Graham. Any number of young ladies would consider themselves fortunate indeed for him to spare them a glance, but Maximilian refused to find himself caught in the parson's mousetrap.

"Mama has yet another success on her hands," she agreed.

"Just the thing, Han," Maximilian said with an affectionate grin. "You shall find yourself a husband in no time with all the swains you have collected this evening alone."

Hannah flushed at her brother's indelicate reference to her marriage prospects. The last thing she wished to discuss before Lord Graham was her suitors. None of them interested her. None of them moved her.

She fluttered her fan to distract herself and settled upon the means to secure a few moments with Lord Graham. "It is woefully hot in here, is it not? I find myself in need of some punch."

"I shall fetch you some, my lady," Lord Graham volunteered.

*Drat.* She had been hoping her brother would play the gentleman first. Her heart sank. *Think, Hannah.*

There were other tricks in a lady's repertoire. The feigned swoon, the torn hem, the pebble in the slipper. Surely one of those would do...

Just as Lord Graham was about to take his leave, Hannah threw caution to the wind and pretended to stumble, jostling into Lord Graham. His reaction was instant, one large hand wrapping around her arm to steady her.

"Oh do forgive me," she said, breathless as his scent washed over her. "I am feeling rather faint, I fear."

"I will escort you to a seat," Lord Graham offered. "Sundenbury, if you would retrieve the punch instead?"

Her heart leapt. His nearness was positively intoxicating. "Yes, please."

Max nodded. "Of course, Graham. Thank you for looking after my sister."

With that, he took his leave of them. Everything within her rejoiced at this unexpected turn of luck. Why, she ought to have

staged a pending swoon ages ago!

Lord Graham led her to a chair and seated himself at her side. An impressive array of flowers hid them from view, providing an aura of intimacy even in the midst of the crowded ballroom.

He turned to her, the full effect of his handsomeness stealing her breath. A teasing smile was on his lips, his bright eyes twinkling with undisguised merriment. "Brava. That was an excellent performance, Lady Hannah."

She fanned herself to chase the heat stealing over her, partially induced by Lord Graham and partially by embarrassment at the ease with which he had seen through her ploy. "And here I was, thinking myself dreadfully clever."

"Oh, you are indisputably clever," he returned, his grin deepening. "Tell me, were you desperate for a respite from the mad whirl, or were you longing for a moment alone with me?"

His query produced a burst of sensation low in her belly. Foreign and heady all at once. She gave her fan another flutter. "And if I were to say the latter, my lord?"

This time, it was not her fancy running away with her. His gaze settled on her mouth. "I suppose I should wish to know why."

"Why?" she repeated, wondering how he could not know the answer already.

"Indeed." He inclined his head, his teasing air giving way to something deeper. Something more intense. "You have at least half a dozen beaux ready to jump if you but snap your fingers, dukes and earls amongst them. Surely you would not need a moment alone with a mere second son."

Had he been paying attention to the suitors paying her court this evening, then? Hope lifted within her, rather like an ascension balloon. "I can assure you, there is nothing *mere* about you at all, Lord Graham."

His expression shifted. *Dear heavens*, had she said too much? Had she not said enough?

"You pay me an undeserved honor, my lady," he said. "I am not worthy of such esteem."

Of course he was. Lord Graham Dowling was a paragon of masculine perfection. He was handsome, intelligent, gallant, and kind. From the first moment she had met him, she had fallen helplessly beneath his spell.

"You are," she corrected him, then bit her lip to keep from revealing more.

She hardly knew where she stood with him. His attentions had never been romantic. He had always been Max's school chum, older than she, out of reach. Now that she'd had her debut, she was free to

see at last if she had a glimmer of a chance with him.

The strains of the orchestra swirled around them. Hannah wished they were truly alone. That Maximilian would never find them. How she wanted to remain here, basking in Lord Graham's presence.

"Will you save a dance for me?" he asked her, stealing her from her thoughts.

She would happily save every dance for him. Her heart beat with unadulterated happiness.

"Nothing would please me more, my lord."

He smiled at her boyishly, tenderly, and Hannah found herself smiling back at him, as if they shared a secret none of their fellow revelers were privy to.

*Oh yes.*

This man would be hers. She vowed it.



## Chapter Three



*Now*

HANNAH SHIVERED IN the icy winter's air, rubbing her arms. Torches had been lit to facilitate revelers who grew too weary of the crush indoors and sought a breath of air. But the night was so cold, she was the only soul foolish enough to brave the punishing December chill. The unseasonably early snow which had fallen made the extensive Abingdon Hall gardens look as if they twinkled beneath the moon's glowing light.

But she could scarcely admire the alabaster beauty.

She was too distraught.

She had told herself, following Fawkesbury's death, as she went out of mourning and began resuming her role in society, that it was inevitable she would see Graham again. Inevitable they would cross paths. But she had not been prepared for it to happen so soon. Nor had she imagined it would occur here, at this gathering, her first since her re-entr e into the polite world.

She had failed to anticipate how many lords and ladies would be in attendance at this house party. And especially not him. Why *him*, of all gentlemen? Why could she not have simply acted the chaperone to the twins for the next few weeks, and then returned home without ever having to be reminded of...

"It is a cold evening, is it not, Lady Fawkesbury?"

She stiffened at the voice, deep and low. Familiar, even though it had been years since she had last heard it. *Devil take him*, but that voice still slid over her like a caress after all this time. After his betrayal.

Heart thumping, body traitorously aware of him, she spun about.

He stood near. In dangerous proximity. He was tall, so very tall, towering over her like a vengeful god. In the glow of the torchlight, his handsome face took on a menacing quality. His jaw was rigid. His bright-blue eyes seemed to spark with icy fire. All the subtle colors in his hair seemed to come alive, the cinnamon and gold more radiant with the torch's loving illumination.

He was so handsome, her heart hurt.

She found her voice at last, determined to sound unaffected. "The air seems to have grown suddenly colder, Lord Haven."

"You expected a warm greeting from me?" he asked, taking a step closer. Then another.

He still smelled the same, spice and lemons. After all this time, she ought to have forgotten it, but the scent, mingling in the crisp winter air, unleashed a deep, familiar sense of homecoming within her.

Ridiculous, she scoffed inwardly. This man had never been her home.

She refused to retreat, though the distance between them had grown uncomfortably small. "I expected no greeting from you, my lord. Indeed, we are hardly acquaintances any longer. I should think it decidedly odd for you to seek me out."

He laughed, but the sound held no levity, only bitterness. "You think too much, Lady Fawkesbury."

"Once, I did not think enough," she snapped before she could think better of it.

Those words of hers were telling. Far too telling. How she wished she could recall them.

"*Touché*, my lady." His countenance, like his tone, was grim. "Rest assured I did not seek you out. I merely required an escape from the swelter and the crush of the ballroom."

"You did not wish to dance?" she asked, and again, she regretted the question.

His presence at this house party had shaken her. His nearness in these moonlit gardens had stripped her of the last of her defenses. She was unprepared for battle.

"Soon enough."

His clipped response only filled her with more questions. She knew he had not married, not yet. Nor was he betrothed. Had he come here to this house party in search of a bride? Perhaps seeking to make a match with one of the Winter sisters?

She despised the jealousy surging to life within her at the notion. "Then perhaps you ought to leave me to enjoy a breath of air in peace."

"Why?" He came nearer still. One more step. He was close enough to touch. "Does my presence disturb you?"

Yes.

"No," she said blithely. Too blithely, she feared. "Of course not. Remain out here for as long as you like."

*Until your fingers and toes freeze*, she added silently. *Until you are as frostbitten as your heart.*

She would go if he chose to remain. For she could not bear any more of such inane talk with him, as if he had not destroyed her. As if he had not abandoned her at the time when she had needed him most.

As if he had not owned her heart.

As if he did not still own it, *damn him*. In spite of his betrayal. In spite of the years.

How foolish she was, how weak. Because seeing Graham once had been enough to remind her just how deep her feelings for him ran, whether or not he had ever deserved them.

A shudder wracked her then.

"You are cold, Lady Fawkesbury?" he asked, seeing everything, as always.

She wanted to tell him not to refer to her by that hated name, a name which had become the source of so much of her pain for the last few years. But she said nothing.

"Pray, do not feign concern for my wellbeing." She rubbed her arms, partially in an effort to warm herself, part in an effort to protect.

She knew quite well he had never cared for her. He had merely been amusing himself with her. Oh, how she wished she had been wiser then.

"Nothing about you has concerned me for five years, madam," he snapped, his voice colder than the air.

His words were the equivalent of a slap.

She kept from flinching by exerting all her control. "Has it been five years? I confess, I had not recalled."

A wretched lie, as it happened. She knew exactly how long it had been since she had seen him last. To the day. Hour.

*Minute.*

A half smile curved his lips, but it was not the smile she remembered. This was the vicious smile of a predator. "I should not have expected you to, Lady Fawkesbury. Your memory has always been a problem for you, has it not? Along with your loyalty."

The loathing simmering beneath his words, belying the chill with which he spoke them, gave her pause. What had he to be angry about? He was the one who had abandoned her.

"On the contrary, Lord Haven. My loyalty has never been called into question," she countered. "I wish I could say the same for others."

Even to Fawkesbury, she had remained loyal. Whilst he had made his bed with countless others, Hannah had not committed adultery. Her reputation as a married lady was, ironically, far more spotless than it had ever been as a debutante.

"What a lark. Need I remind you of the promise you made me?" His low voice held an accusatory note, a bitterness she had not expected from him.

"How dare you?" she demanded.

What rancor could he possibly harbor when he was the one who had disappeared from her life when she had needed him most? She

had been eighteen, a stupid girl who knew nothing of the world. He had been her brother's dashing, handsome friend. A gentleman, she had supposed, and one with whom she could trust her heart, and so much more...

But she could not think of those dark days now, nor the light she had so wrongly supposed she had found in the man before her. He had been the most heartless, soulless of cads. Taking advantage of an innocent, then leaving her.

"How dare *I*, my lady?" He reached out, caught her chin in his thumb and forefinger, holding her captive with the lightest touch.

Deep within, she mourned the glove on his hands. She ached for his touch, one last time, his skin on hers.

*Stupid, traitorous body.*

But still, though her mind knew she should move... Though the December wind blew, though she knew this man had never loved her as she loved him, she could not go. She was immobile, speechless, staring up at him. Lost in his eyes. In the memories. She shivered again, but it had nothing to do with the cold.

"Damn you, Han," he growled, his other hand going to her waist. "Tell me you do not remember this."

His head dipped toward hers.

Go, warned a voice inside her. *Run.*

There was a ballroom filled with people just beyond them, the faint strains of the orchestra reaching her. But she silenced the voice. Ignored the repercussions. She stepped forward, rose on her toes.

Her arms went around Graham's neck. Their mouths met.



HE HAD DREAMED of her, so many nights. Years had passed, but he had never forgotten. Though he had clung to the pain of her betrayal, her defection, he had not stopped wanting her. Nor had he ceased loving her.

Which was why kissing Hannah, the Countess of Fawkesbury, was the biggest mistake of his life.

Her lips were warm, in defiance of the cold night. She opened for him instantly, her arms were wrapped around his neck, her soft breasts crushed into his chest, and it was as if the five years between them had never happened. He was once more the man he had been then, unjaded, unscathed. His tongue slid inside, playing against hers. She made the sweet sound he remembered, surrender and need, the one that had never failed to make his cock spring to life.

Tonight was no exception.

Sadly, he possessed no restraint when it came to this woman. Nor

had he any pride. Because now that he had her in his arms, every honed instinct roared to life. He kissed her with all the hunger burning inside him, the flame that had never been doused. Not by time, distance, or pain.

She tasted sweet, like the spiced negus being served at the ball, and like everything he had ever wanted. Her tongue invaded his mouth in return, hesitantly at first, and then with greater ardor. He had to have more of her. He had to devour her.

This was not enough.

He was ravenous for her. Need fired through his veins, pooled in his loins. He caught the lushness of her lower lip in his teeth and gently nipped before licking away the sting. The hand he held on her waist could not resist traveling. He slid it upward in a caress, cupping her breast.

Her nipples were sweetly sensitive. He remembered that about her. Her honey hair was shot with copper and curled when it was unbound. He remembered that, too. Her hips were pale as cream, generously curved. She had a birthmark on her left hip shaped like a heart, and it had never failed to tantalize him. A mole just above her right knee. He knew her laughter. How it felt to sink deep inside her.

All the memories came flooding back in one kiss.

How perfectly her body fitted to his, as if she had been made for him, and it had always been this way. The fire inside him, the blazing lust to have her, to make her his, all returned with staggering force. His desire pounded in his pulse, licked through him like the flames in a burning house, threatening to destroy him. He had known other women since her, but none had been Hannah, and that had never been more painfully apparent than now.

He had to have her again.

If he was going to shackle himself for life, to find a bride and settle down, doing his duty as he had vowed he would to Gervase on his deathbed, then Graham wanted one more taste of passion. One more night of bliss. He had to make love to Hannah once more.

Just once.

He had to have her beneath him, had to feel her sweet body surrendering to his.

One kiss, and he was wild with need. Drunk on her taste, on her sweetness. Drunk on Hannah. But she was kissing him, too. Kissing him fervently, frantically. Her velvet-soft lips responded to his so perfectly.

He wanted her now, but that was foolish. Still, he moved them deeper into the shadows. The wind bit at his flesh, reminding him they could not remain outdoors long, but he was reluctant to let her go. Her scent surrounded him, mingling with the cool freshness of

nature: lavender and lemon.

Without ending their kiss, he maneuvered them into a sheltered space between two sculpted holly hedges. A marble statue of some Greek god hovered over them. By the light of the moon, and with Hannah in his arms, he did not give enough of a damn to decipher which one. He had her back against the statue's base, and then he moved his lips to her throat.

With a complete disregard for the marks he might leave behind, he nibbled on a tender cord of her neck. Even her skin was delicious. Soft and smooth and warm, salty and flowery, all at once.

Her fingers were in his hair now, and his hand had burrowed in her gown. He grabbed a fistful, wanting to lift it to her waist, wanting desperately to get beneath it. Until he recalled he was still wearing gloves, denying him the sensation of her flesh bare against his. Another burst of wind whipped a fine sheen of powdery snow against them. It coasted over his heated face, a frosty recrimination he ignored.

Five years without her.

Now that he had her in his arms, he could not stop.

He kissed his way to her pulse, where it beat fast in a telling rhythm. Down to her décolletage. He kissed the tops of her breasts, abandoned her gown in favor of cupping her breast once more. She arched into him. Through her stays, he found her nipple with his thumb, pebbled.

"Graham," she whispered.

The sound of his name in her husky voice, drenched with desire, sent another roaring rush of lust straight through him. And with it came more memories. The country house party where they had first made love, a walk through the rain when they had taken refuge in one of the temples built upon the estate they visited, and they had made love for the first time with the rain pounding on the leaden glass overhead. They had met everywhere. In her chamber, in his. They had met each other by the stream. Had ridden to an abandoned hunting cabin.

She had told him she loved him, that he had stolen her heart forever, and he had believed her. He had supposed she was true, that every word, touch, look, was genuine.

Those days had been the best fortnight of his life. Until word had reached him of Gervase's riding accident. The news had been dire, his brother on his deathbed, and Graham had been forced to leave without telling her goodbye, leaving her a note instead. He had still been at his brother's side in Surrey when word had reached him of Hannah's sudden nuptials to Fawkesbury.

The news had devastated him. They had parted as lovers, without

a true farewell. And he had believed her loyal and steadfast. He had wanted no other as his bride, and he would have done anything to make her his.

As if the wounds were new, the sharp sting of her betrayal sliced through him all over again, reminding him why he must never again trust the beautiful, passionate creature coming to life in his arms. He could not believe her. Did not dare open himself for a new betrayal all over again.

Yet, he could not keep himself from wanting her. On that desperate realization, he tugged down her bodice. Her breasts sprang free of her bodice and stays. In the moonlight, he was treated to the incredibly erotic sight of two full, creamy breasts tipped with pale-pink nipples that were hard from need as well as from the cold.

He would warm them.

He bowed his head like a suppliant, like a man at the altar of a goddess who owned him, and sucked a beaded tip into his mouth. She moaned, tugging at his hair. The reserved widow he had seen in the ballroom was gone, and in her place was the wild girl she had been.

The wild girl who had stolen his heart with a simple look the first time he had met her. His friend's sister. Someone he should never desire. An innocent. A lady. The daughter of a duke. He had been a second son then, few prospects aside from taking up the parliamentary cudgels in the House of Commons. She had been the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld.

She still was.

And she still responded to him as if her body came to life beneath his touch.

Some things did not change.

He sucked her other nipple, and she thrust her breast deeper into his mouth on a keening cry. All the desperation he felt inside himself was reflected in the husky reverberation of her voice. It echoed in the night, like the cry of a bird scared from her nest. The years did not matter now. He had not forgotten the way she liked to be touched or the actions that gave her the most pleasure.

He gently bit her nipple, then tugged.

"Oh, Graham, please," she begged.

And he knew what she pleaded for. It was the same thing he wanted. There was nothing that could stop him from lifting her skirts, opening the fall of his breeches, and plunging his rigid cock inside her. He knew she wanted him as much as he wanted her. He knew without removing his gloves, without touching her cunny, that she desired him. That she would be wet, so wet, for him, as she had always been.

He sucked her nipple, a growl of appreciation rumbling from him.

But then the door opened, bringing with it the loud hum of revelers talking, a tittering laugh, the strains of a country reel just beginning. And also with it came a realization of where they were, who they were, and why he could not mindlessly make love to her in a darkened corner of a winter garden.

They were not alone. Far from it. At least a hundred others danced and made merry within the massive ballroom, beneath the brilliance of the chandeliers. That was not all, however. He was looking for a bride, *by God*. His chances of finding a suitable lady would vanish should he be caught making love to the widowed Lady Fawkesbury in the moonlit gardens of Abingdon Hall.

He released her nipple, tearing his mouth away. The action required every bit of will he possessed. Because all he wanted to do was to have her, here and now. With shaking hands, he restored her bodice, lifting it back into place.

The faint sounds of another couple chattering reached them.

Her eyes were wide on his as she, too, realized the dangerous implications of what they were about. They had precious little time. Seconds, mayhap.

“Let me come to you,” he whispered. “Tonight.”

He would find her chamber. They could end this. Douse the flames with the only antidote: one more time in each other’s arms.

She shook her head, eyes wide, expression stricken in the moonlight. “No.”

Footsteps neared. The voices grew closer. They were running out of time before he had to escape deeper into the holly hedges, leaving behind the impression she had been greeting the cool air all alone.

“Yes,” he pressed. “This is not over between us, Han. Surely you must recognize that.”

“It has been over for five long years, Lord Haven,” she bit out with more harshness than he would have thought possible after such a fiery kiss.

Before he could protest again, she swept away, leaving him to shrink into the holly maze and the cold darkness of the night.

Alone as ever.



## Chapter Four



*Then*

IT WAS A beautiful day to go for a walk.

Autumn tinged the air at Falwyck Abbey. Berkshire at this time of year always filled Hannah with a sense of marvel. The approach of winter showed gloriously in the change of leaves, the rich scents so different from summer.

As she walked beneath an apple tree, a fruit fell directly before her, landing in the grass with a thud. *How odd.* Hannah paused and glanced up.

That was when she saw him, presiding over her from a thick lower branch of the wizened old tree. Leave it to him to go climbing about and hiding in the leaves.

"Lord Graham!" She could not keep the delight from her voice. "What are you doing up there?"

Thank heavens he was joining them for this country house party. They had spent the last few weeks of the Season on a merry dance. But she still did not know precisely where she stood with him. He had not asked for her hand.

"What is any gentleman doing when he climbs a tree?" he called back, grinning that effortless smile she loved so well. "Picking apples, of course."

"You nearly knocked me in the head with that apple, you know," she groused without heat.

"I would never do you injury, Lady Hannah. This I swear." He held a hand over his heart. "And my aim is impeccable."

She believed him. There was nothing at which Lord Graham Dowling did not excel. He had made her fall in love with him without any effort. But she did not dare tell him that just yet.

Mayhap not ever.

"You are incorrigible, sir." Hannah raised a brow, eying him there in the leafy boughs. "I do believe I can count on one hand the number of times I have seen a gentleman hiding in a tree."

He simply smiled down at her, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world for a lady to be craning her neck to speak to a man high above her in the branches. "How many others have there been aside from me?"

"You are the only one," she admitted. *In so many ways.* Again, a sentiment she dared not voice. "Why are you climbing trees to pick apples, my lord?"

It hardly seemed a lordly act. Though Lord Graham was indisputably athletic of form, and strong, she had not supposed him the sort of gentleman to spend his time picking apples when the rest of the men in their assemblage were off on the hunt.

"Would you believe it was to impress a lady whose eye I cannot seem to catch?"

His query was so soft, she thought she must have misheard him. It was only the sudden intensity in Lord Graham's mien that suggested otherwise. He could hardly be speaking of Hannah, could he?

Her heart gave a pang at the notion. "Am I acquainted with the lady in question?"

Though she struggled to keep her tone nonchalant, she feared she gave herself away. Lord Graham watched her, his smile fading, his gaze never wavering from hers.

"You know her exceedingly well," he said.

If he was speaking of a bosom bow of hers, she would never recover.

"Why do you suppose climbing a tree would impress her?" she asked instead, playing this little game of his for as long as she could.

"In truth, I was attempting to surprise her by picking her some apples as I know the fruit is her favorite."

*Thump, thump, thump* went her heart, faster than ever before. It was impossible to believe he was speaking of her. That the dances, lingering looks, and moments they had shared over the last few weeks had been everything she had hoped and more.

"Apples are *my* favorite," she managed to say past a tongue that felt as if it had been tied in knots.

Lord Graham merely smiled again. "Catch."

She reacted without thought, the apple he tossed to her landing perfectly in her cupped hands. The fruit was red and shiny, perfectly round. Nary a hint of a worm hole to be found. Of course, he would have found her the best apple in the tree. He was Lord Graham Dowling.

"Thank you for the apple," she told him, more confused than ever. "I suppose I must carry on with my walk now. It would hardly do for us to be caught here alone together."

Although the strict rules of Town were often relaxed in the country, Hannah's father was a rigid adherer to propriety. If she were caught alone with Lord Graham, even with her on earth and him in the tree above her, she had no doubt there would be a severe price to pay. As much as she wanted Lord Graham to be hers, she had no wish

to entrap him. She would marry him because it was his most fervent desire, or she would not marry him at all.

“Do not go just yet,” Lord Graham said, halting her before she could even make her first step. “You have yet to tell me if I succeeded.”

“If you succeeded?” Her gaze was pinned upon him once more, searching, seeking.

He inclined his head. “At impressing the lady whose eye I cannot seem to catch.”

If he was speaking of herself, he had caught her eye long ago. For years. Since before her presentation at court. “I cannot fathom you failing to catch the eye of any lady, my lord.”

“Do you trust me, Lady Hannah?” he asked, his voice low and laden with intent.

It was a strange question, she thought, but one for which she had a ready response. “Yes. Of course I do, my lord. Surely you must know that.”

He moved with effortless grace, lowering his body to the branch of the apple tree nearest to the ground, and held out his hand toward her. “Come here.”

Still clutching the apple he had tossed her, she did as he asked, moving toward him. Her skirts rustled in the grasses. A bee buzzed lazily past. A breeze rose, making the leaves of the tree sing, sending a tendril of hair over her cheek. She dashed it away and stopped at the base of the tree, her senses heightened to potent awareness.

What game was he playing now?

More importantly, did she risk playing it with him?

“What are you about, my lord?” she asked, hating herself for the huskiness of her voice.

She sounded as if she were affected by his nearness. Because she was. So much for guarding her heart. For proceeding with caution. But if Lord Graham was inviting her to have a cozy tête-à-tête with him concerning the lady who truly had his affections, she would never recover from the blow.

“Take my hand, Han.”

*Han.*

It was the first time he had called her by the sobriquet her family used. The lack of formality slid over her like a caress. She was helpless to resist. She would do anything he asked in this moment, even jump from a cliff.

Hannah placed her hand in his. Her feet left the ground. For a wild moment, she feared she had imagined the sensation until she realized Lord Graham was lifting her. Lifting her with ease, as if she weighed scarcely anything more than a feather.

A gasp tore from her. She dropped the apple as he hauled her into the tree with him. "My lord," she protested. "What are you doing?"

"What do you suppose I am doing?"

There was scarcely any strain in his voice as he lifted her higher, then clamped his other hand on her waist. Tightening his hold on her, he pulled her onto the branch alongside him.

"Oh!" she cried out, pleasure and fear mingling. Her skirts and feet dangled over the grass below.

She was in the tree. With Lord Graham.

A giggle escaped her. It was so silly, so unexpected. She turned to face him and her giggle fled. He was close. His arm was yet wrapped around her waist, she realized, securing her to him, keeping her steady.

She swallowed past a swiftly rising lump in her throat. "You have lifted me into the tree, my lord."

"Indeed," he said tenderly, his bright-blue gaze lingering on her lips like a touch. "I have."

"Ladies do not climb trees," she felt compelled by her dignity to protest. And also because she was horridly flustered by his nearness and the suggestion underlying his every word and deed.

Part of her wished he would simply say what he meant.

The other part of her was terrified it would not be what she wanted to hear.

"You did not climb," he corrected her, a smile once more flirting with the corners of his lips. "I lifted you. Therefore, this cannot count as a black mark upon your honor."

The fingers at her waist gave a gentle, affectionate squeeze. No one had ever touched her with such familiarity, including Lord Graham. Especially Lord Graham. What was happening?

If she leaned into him, their mouths would be near enough to touch. The thought sent a shock through her. Longing, hunger, and love collided within her. She did not know where to look. What to do. She would settle for attempting conversation.

Was there safety in words? She was certain there was not safety in anything as far as this man was concerned.

"Shall I thank you then?" she ventured. "For lifting me here? I am not certain I wished to be stuck in a tree with you, my lord."

That was a blatant lie. She would be happy to be stuck with him anywhere.

Forever.

"Thank me if you like," he said slowly, his gaze searing hers. "As you like."

*Oh.*

That seemed an invitation. Did it not? Was the height of her

perch on the branch making her giddy? Or was it merely Lord Graham?

Her mouth went dry. Her heart thumped and thudded and carried on. "How would you prefer me to express my gratitude, Lord Graham?"

"Graham," he corrected her, reaching out to brush the stray curl which had returned to her cheek.

It must have somehow gotten loose as he pulled her to the branch. How grateful she was to that errant tendril of hair. His fingertips grazed her skin, and she did not think any touch had ever felt finer.

"Graham," she repeated, pleased with the intimacy of foregoing formality. "How would you have me thank you?"

"In such circumstances, since I have rescued you from the desperate danger of the grass below, I can only think of one way." His tone was teasing and light. Flirtatious. *Maddening*. "With a kiss."

*With a kiss*, he had said. Three small words. Three words that changed her world and stole her breath. Could she do it? Did she dare? And in a tree, of all places? Her position was precarious in more ways than one.

She had never before kissed another gentleman. But she had longed to kiss him. Had spent so many restless nights, lying awake in her bed and thinking of his lips, his eyes, his dazzling smile. Dreaming of the day when he would notice her.

He was noticing her now.

But he was also frowning. "Unless I have paid you insult in the request, my lady. I would never dream of—"

She silenced the remainder of his words with her mouth on his. A quick press of her lips. She knew a moment of bursting warmth, and then she was aflame. Like dry kindling waiting for the strike of flint. Terrified by her reaction to him, and also fearful she may tumble from the tree in her wild response, she ended the kiss before it had even begun.

"Hannah," she said, her voice thick with emotion.

He blinked, looking as shocked by the brief connection they had just shared as she felt. "I beg your pardon?"

"If I am to call you Graham," she explained painstakingly, "then you must call me Hannah."

He studied her so intently her cheeks flushed. "Only when we are alone. Otherwise, the damage to your reputation would be far too great."

Hannah gave a jerky nod. "Of course."

Was it wrong of her to hope they were alone together as often as possible? For her to long for more kisses? Endless kisses...

“Hannah,” he said tenderly, his gaze sweeping over her face.

“Graham,” she returned.

It was the perfect moment. Too perfect to be real.

And then a bee buzzed between their faces, flying about Hannah’s bonnet in determined swoops. She shrieked, madly waving at the overzealous creature. And promptly lost her balance.

A gasp tore from her throat. She was going to fall.

Fear lanced her.

Her stomach upended.

But then, a strong, reassuring arm slid around her waist, hauling her toward Graham’s solid chest. She threw her arms around his neck, holding on tightly. The bee was gone, thank heavens. And he had saved her.

“Terrible little fellow,” Graham said softly, “mistaking you for a blossom. Could he not see you are far lovelier than a mere flower could ever be?”

“Thank you for saving me.” Here was her moment to release him. To observe propriety. To remove herself from his arms and this tree both.

But when had what she *ought* to do ever been what she *wanted* to do?

“You owe me a debt of gratitude anew,” he teased, his gaze dipping to her lips once more.

Yes, she did. And she knew precisely how she wanted him to claim his reward.

She licked her suddenly dry lips, the bee altogether forgotten. “How would you have me repay you this time?”

“More of the same, I do believe.” His head lowered.

His mouth was within her reach. She met him halfway. This kiss, however, was nothing like the last. This kiss was not a mere meeting of mouths, a hasty contact and then done. No, indeed. Graham anchored her to him, holding her still, his lips moving over hers. Coaxing her to respond.

And respond she did. Hesitantly at first. Her second kiss. Oh, how wondrous. *Graham* was kissing her. It seemed a dream as she opened for his seeking tongue. He tasted sweet and tart, like the first bite of an apple. Like the most decadent thing she had ever tasted. She wanted more.

Her fingers hesitantly moved. She brushed the softness of his hair, those fiery strands she had dreamt about touching on so many occasions. It was as soft and sleek as it looked. He kissed as marvelously as she had imagined, too.

She never wanted his lips to leave hers.

He held her closer, a low growl leaving his throat that sent a

frisson of delight chasing down her spine. Her breasts were crushed against his chest, their bodies perfectly aligned. She had never been so close to a gentleman. Now she understood why propriety dictated ladies and gentlemen maintain a proper amount of distance between them. Because Graham's large, solid form—so different from hers in such a delightful fashion—was pure temptation.

He deepened the kiss, his lips worshiping hers, and she suddenly understood how a lady could so willingly be ruined. There was nothing better than being in this man's arms, than his beautiful mouth on hers. She felt as if she had not truly lived until this moment. How fitting she should be suspended above the ground, for her head felt as if it were in the clouds.

His mouth left hers at last, and he raised his head, his gaze burning into hers. Reflected in his handsome countenance was the maelstrom whirling inside her—confusion, shock, need. Desperate, abiding yearning.

"My God, Han," he whispered. "You have no idea how many times I imagined kissing you just like this. But I never dared to hope..."

Hannah smiled back at him, hope beating in her heart. "Nor did I."

But now?

Now, she most certainly did.

"I could stay in this tree with you forever." Graham's gaze dipped to her mouth, and she felt the touch as surely as if his lips were still fused with hers. "I could keep you to myself and never let you go."

That was what she wanted as well.

The hope took flight. Soaring into the sky.

"We cannot," she reminded him, recalling her reputation at last. "We would cause a dreadful scandal."

"That would not do." A beautiful grin curved his lips. "I suppose I must allow my angel to return to earth. For now."

With ginger care, he lowered her to the grass once more. Hannah's heart sang the whole way home.

## Chapter Five



*Now*

*LET ME COME to you.*

With five words, Graham had shaken her world, leaving her feeling as if everything she had known had been suddenly torn asunder, proven to be a lie.

*Not Graham*, she reminded herself. *He is the Marquess of Haven now.*

For despite the passionate kisses and intimacies they had shared earlier that evening, he was very much a stranger to her. A stranger she must keep at bay at all costs. The danger was too omnipotent: for the reputations of her sisters as well as for herself.

Hannah paced the thick carpet of the guest chamber she had been assigned. She was painfully aware she could not remain a widow forever. Fawkesbury had all but beggared them before drinking himself to death. She was left with nothing but a tiny widow's portion.

Father had been too prideful to make provisions for her prior to her nuptials, so desperate to marry her off to an earl after the scandal she had been about to cause. Even the money he had settled upon her in her dowry had been lost quite easily by her husband. Fawkesbury had been a denizen of the green baize since he had been a young man. Nothing had changed after he had married her, other than that he had used her dowry to facilitate his gambling habits. The only boon of his vice had been that when he was in London, she was blissfully alone, and he could not hurt her.

But she must not think upon the misery of her life as Countess of Fawkesbury when her husband had been alive. She must think, instead, upon the weakness that had allowed her to behave so foolishly in the gardens tonight. She must gird herself against any such future mistakes, for she could not afford to sully Addy and Evie with her actions. Nor could she afford to sully herself.

Once had been enough, and she had done penance for her sins. She had no wish to take another fall or to serve another sentence with a rotter of a husband thanks to the Marquess of Haven. On a miserable cry, she stalked to her dressing area, where a pitcher and basin sat. She splashed handfuls of cold water on her face, and then scrubbed at her cheeks, trying to wash away the memory of those blistering kisses.



The memory of his touch.

A low knock sounded on her door, and she froze, fearing it was him.

Heart pounding, she dabbed at her face with the cloth, thinking her skin must look a reddened fright after her zealous ablutions. Then she chastised herself for such an unworthy thought. She must not care about what Graham thought of her. Or how she looked.

And above all, she must not grant him entrée to her chamber.

*Haven*, she reminded herself belatedly. *Haven, not Graham*. Indeed, Graham was dead to her, a ghost of her past, if indeed he had ever truly existed at all. Certainly, the powerfully handsome man who had swept her into the shadows and had his way with her tonight was not he.

*He smelled the same*, whispered a taunting voice inside her.

He had tasted the same as well.

And his kiss was every bit as delicious as it once was.

“No,” she said aloud, with far more force than she had intended.

Her voice echoed in the chamber, like a shot.

“Han?” came a muffled voice from the other side of the door.

It was female and familiar. Beloved.

Hannah heaved a sigh of relief, stalked across the chamber, and opened the portal to find Adele standing there, her expression hesitant. “What can it be, Addy? Do you not know the danger in wandering about the corridors so late at night in mixed company?”

Her sister paled, worrying her lower lip. “Forgive me, Han. It is merely that I wanted to speak with you. We are separated only by a wall, after all. It was seven steps. Eight at the most, just around the corner.”

Guilt assailed Hannah, both at the sharpness of her tone and just how close she had come to destroying her sister’s chance of making a good match earlier. She stepped back, gesturing for Adele to enter. “Come in, then, dearest. What can be the matter?”

“That is what I wanted to ask you,” her sister said, crossing the threshold.

She was wearing a night rail and wrapper, Hannah realized, which was also frightfully scandalous. She closed the door in a hurry and turned to face her younger sister.

“Addy, you are not wearing the attire in which an innocent lady ought to be seen about the halls.” Realizing her error, she shook her head. “Forget that. What I mean to say is that you should not be gadding about the halls at all as an innocent lady. It is most unseemly, and you are behaving quite recklessly with your reputation. This is not a promenade, my dear, and whilst the rules are a trifle relaxed because of the nature of a country house party, you cannot afford to

allow yourself to be ruined. Trust me on this.”

Her sister appeared undeterred by her chastisement. Adele swept toward her, catching her hands and giving them a reassuring squeeze. “As I said, it was nothing more than a few steps and round a bend, Han. But I needed to see you, because I wanted to be certain you are well.”

“Me?” Hannah frowned, for if anyone ought to be concerned about another, it was her about Adele.

Her sister had been notably withdrawn thus far over the course of this house party. This morning, in particular, she had been pale and wan. “It is *I* who should be worried about *you*, Addy. You scarcely ate more than a few bites this morning at breakfast, and at tea, you were napping. Are you ill?”

It made sense, now that Hannah thought of it. Her sister ordinarily was possessed of a hale constitution. Her appetite had never suffered, though one would hardly know given her willowy frame. Quite the opposite of Hannah’s full curves.

“Of course I am not ill.”

But despite her sister’s denial, Adele compressed her lips and released her grip on Hannah’s hands, spinning away to pace the chamber much as Hannah had been doing before her sister’s untimely interruption.

Something was amiss. Adele was ordinarily quiet and composed. Where Evie was the more garrulous of the twins and the one everyone invariably noticed, Adele was the wallflower, the practical sister, the silent one. She was the one who watched. The one who was knowledgeable beyond her tender age. She was not the sister Hannah would have expected to knock on her door this late in the evening.

Or, to be dreadfully honest, ever. Adele always seemed so very self-assured. So utterly composed. But her sister was not composed now. No, indeed, she was quite flustered.

“Are you certain, my dear?” Hannah asked, following her sister to where she paused by one of the two large windows on the far wall.

In the morning light, they overlooked the gardens where Hannah had so recently come close to ruin. Desperate ruin. Stupid ruin.

Her self-loathing had not been this potent in years. Not since her rushed nuptials to Fawkesbury. Not since the first time he had raised his hand to her.

Their wedding night.

But she would not think of that now. She was free. He could never hurt her again. If only he had met his demise before it had been too late...

“Han?”

Her sister’s worried voice broke through Hannah’s troubled

musings once more. She realized she had paused in the middle of the chamber, overcome by the weight of the past, mingling with the unexpected weight of the present.

She shook herself free from those old chains, forced a bright smile she little felt. "What is it, Addy? Why are you seeking me out at this late hour instead of seeking your rest? Was Lord Foy rude? Did he upset you in some fashion?"

If he had, Hannah would box his ears. She vowed it. Addy had the sweetest heart, always looking to take care of those around her, rather like a mother hen taking care of her flock. She rather reminded Hannah of herself at the same age. But it was difficult indeed to recall what she had been like then, when her heart had been whole. Before Graham's betrayal. Before she had been saddled with a husband who not only did not care for her, but who had taken pleasure in her pain.

None of that, she reminded herself.

Forgetting could not vanquish the pain. However, it certainly made rising each morning far more bearable than it would be otherwise.

"Lord Foy is lovely," Adele said. "He has only been polite. I do think he is a kind and true gentleman, and I believe he wishes to marry me..."

"Oh, Addy, that is wonderful news!" She caught her sister's hands in hers once more, and this time she was the one to give them a reassuring squeeze. "Lord Foy is an excellent catch, and I do believe he is an honorable man. His esteem for you is undeniable."

Lord Foy was not the sort of man who would hit his wife, Hannah knew. From the moment she had first made the acquaintance of her former husband, there had been an indefinable quality he possessed—a general coldness and hostility—which had put her on edge. But she had been too naïve then to know the damage a man could do.

She was wiser now.

Hardened as well.

But Adele was not smiling. Not sharing her relief. Instead, she looked sad.

"I wish it were wonderful news," her sister said on a heavy sigh. "That is why I wanted to speak with you. I am terribly confused, Han. I wish I cared about Lord Foy in the same manner he claims he cares for me. But I do not."

*Oh, dear.*

Perhaps her inner conflict was reason for her sister's ailments. And the trouble was, Hannah understood. *Lord*, how she understood, albeit in a different sense.

"Lord Foy seems as if he is kind and gentle," she pointed out softly. "He does not seem the sort of man who would ever hurt you. I

saw the way he looked at you tonight, Addy. I do hope you are not holding out hope for some romantic nonsense. No one can reassure you better than I that such a fantasy will not be forthcoming. If a lady must wed, and it is certain most of us have no other choice, it is far preferable to marry a kind man."

Adele searched her gaze, her expression hardening. "Did Fawkesbury beat you?"

The question, so unexpected, so unfettered, robbed the breath from her. Shocked her. Hannah could not form a response. Instead, she released her hold on her sister and spun away, stalking toward the flickering fire in the grate.

No one had ever asked her such a direct question in five years. Not her father. Not her mother. Not anyone.

That Addy, sweet, innocent, quiet Addy would suspect such violence had occurred to Hannah shocked her. And worried her, too. Instantly, she was on guard, protective of her sister.

She spun back around. "Has someone hit *you*, Addy?"

"Of course not," Adele said. "But I...I saw a bruise on your arm, Han, two summers ago at Fillmore Hall."

Shame seeped through her. "Fawkesbury had a temper. Particularly when he was losing at the tables or when he was in his cups. He was not a gentle man."

"That rotter!" Her sister's outraged voice snapped through the chamber. "Someone ought to have pummeled him. I told Maximilian, but he did not believe me."

Their brother, Maximilian, had enough problems of his own, and it came as no surprise to Hannah that he would not have heeded Adele's suspicions. Even if he had listened, there would have been nothing he could have done to aid Hannah. Fawkesbury had never beaten her with his fists.

"It is over now, Addy," she said quietly. A year had come and gone since her husband's death. "He can no longer hurt me."

"Why did you marry him?" her sister asked then. "The two of you never suited, even from the beginning."

No one knew the truth of why she had wed Fawkesbury. No one save her mother, father, and Fawkesbury himself. She had kept her silence out of embarrassment and fear. But something about seeing the man she had once loved tonight—something about having been in his arms once more—changed her.

"I had no choice," she admitted. "I was with child."

Adele gasped. "Fawkesbury?"

"No," she was quick to deny. "He was not the father."

Understanding dawned on her sister's countenance. "Haven," she guessed, for it was no secret that Hannah had fancied herself wildly in

love with him.

She recalled all too well, in her youthful folly, announcing to Addy and Evie that she was going to marry Lord Graham, as he had been then. A second son. Not yet a marquess.

“Yes.” This confession left her with sadness, for she had lost the child a fortnight after her nuptials to Fawkesbury. “I was young and foolish. I allowed myself to be ruined, and unfortunately, Haven had no intention of making an honorable woman of me. Father left me with a choice: go away to the Continent forever, or marry the earl and remain. I chose to remain.”

“Oh, Hannah.” Her sister crossed the room and embraced her. “Why did you never tell me the truth?”

“Because the truth was shameful.” She hugged Adele tightly, trying to ignore the prickle of ensuing tears. “And it no longer mattered. I had made my decision, and I had no choice but to stay the course.”

“Did Haven know?” Adele asked next.

“I wrote him a letter,” she recalled bitterly. “He never responded.”

“I am so very sorry, Han.” Her sister’s arms tightened around her, and she sniffled. “Neither Fawkesbury nor Haven ever deserved you.”

No, they had not.

She smiled against her sister’s hair. “All is well, Addy. I learned my lesson, and I have no intention of ever making such a dreadful mistake again. But do let my follies serve as a warning for you. It is my fondest wish to see you happy.”

“I wish the same for you,” Adele insisted, drawing back to frown at her. “You deserve happiness as well.”

“I am very happy now,” she said, but even as the words left her, she knew they were a lie.

Because her stubborn, stupid heart had not stopped longing for Graham. And those kisses in the garden had only proved to her just how susceptible she still was to him. She must never allow him near her again.



SHE WAS A fever, infecting his blood.

One taste of her lips, and Graham was as lost for Hannah as he had ever been.

*Why, damn it all?* He could not understand it himself as he prowled the seemingly endless corridors of Abingdon House on his way back to his chamber. He already knew her to be a faithless, heartless conniver, who had chosen a title over the mere second son

she had professed to love. The old wounds she had dealt still oozed. Years had gone by, and his heart had yet to recover from her defection.

His weakness for her made no sense, and his attempts at distracting himself had gone nowhere. He had paced. He had taken himself in hand. He had splashed cold water on his face. And sleep had not been forthcoming.

His inner torment had finally led him to the library where he had managed to secure a Latin volume that he very much doubted would prove much distraction or solace. The opportunity to escape the four mocking walls of his chamber had beckoned, however. Despite making himself spill to thoughts of lifting Hannah's gown and finishing what they had begun in the garden, his cock remained rigid.

He was going to read the treatise until dawn if he had to. His already ravaged pride would not allow him to think of Hannah any more than he already had. He bloody well never should have kissed her. Never should have followed her out to the garden. Never should have touched her.

*By God*, he never should have touched her all those years ago either. But it had not stopped him then. He hoped to hell he had learned some hard lessons in the last five years. That he could control himself better.

Grimacing, he turned the corner in the hall, and ran into a warm, soft body. Undeniably feminine, even in the darkness. The Latin book he had been holding thumped to the floor as he steadied the woman. She was fortunate he had not been holding a brace of candles to light the way, else she would have walked straight into the flames.

"Do forgive me my clumsiness," she said, her hands flitting to his chest as the scent of lavender and citrus hit him.

He knew that sweet, dulcet voice. Knew these generous curves, the flare of her waist. He knew those hands.

It was her.

*Devil take it*, did the universe have a vicious vendetta against him?

## Chapter Six



*Then*

GRAHAM HAD A dilemma.

Or, to be more specific, he had three.

The first was that he had somehow fallen desperately in love with Lady Hannah Saltisford. The second: she was his friend's sister. The third: her father, the Duke of Linross, had not appeared enthused in the slightest at the prospect of a mere second son courting his eldest daughter, who was a recognized diamond of the first water and only on her first Season.

But none of those problems were keeping him from meeting with Lady Hannah in secret in the woodland surrounding the Falwyck Abbey park. He waited beneath the shade of a particularly massive beech tree, its gnarled branches reaching skyward. She had not yet arrived, and already, his heart was beating faster than the hooves of a spooked horse.

Rides were excellent pretenses for slipping away from the rest of the company at the house party. Occasionally, Sundenburg wanted to accompany him. But it had not taken Graham long to realize that if he planned his rides early in the morning, his friend would still be abed, sleeping off the aftereffects of giving the bottle a black eye the night before. A furtively placed note in a book he offered to Lady Hannah—or as he had come to think of her, *Han*—left her the details of where she should meet him and when.

They had met each other clandestinely five times now since that day at the apple tree. It was wrong, and he knew it. His sense of honor demanded he cease his furtive actions and court her directly. But when he had broached the subject with the Duke of Linross immediately following the kisses they had shared, her father's disapproval had been apparent. And Graham had ceased all further inquiries, fearing an outright rejection.

If Linross denied him, Graham would have no choice but to let her go.

But he could no sooner cease pursuing the woman he loved than rip out his beating heart. He wanted Han as his wife. Graham could not shake the hope that if he was certain of her, that if he won her heart as well, she would be able to persuade her father to see reason.

The sound of hoofbeats thundering alerted him to her presence just before she rode into view in the clearing at last. She had come, and he could not quash the yearning to have her in his arms. Where she belonged.

He started for her before she had even dismounted. Han was a skilled horsewoman. Her riding habit was a vivid shade of emerald green that complemented her pale, lush beauty to perfection. Persephone come to life, a goddess within his reach.

For now.

For this moment.

He refused to think about what would happen if Linross denied his suit, because in the next instant, Han had slowed her mare and slid to the ground. She went racing to him, arms outstretched. And he jogged to her, meeting her halfway.

What else could he do but take her in his arms and swing her in a full circle. The joy of this bright, unfettered morning and the woman he loved looking up at him with dark, glittering eyes and what he could only pray was her own tender feelings reflected.

“Han,” he greeted her, but the rest of his words were lost. She rose on her toes and pressed her lips to his.

Her mouth.

*Good God*, it was heaven. *She* was heaven. Paradise in skirts. In his arms. Everything he had ever wanted, right here, within reach. And yes, too good to be true. That went without saying.

He pulled her closer, bringing her curves into delicious contact with his body. Soft, full breasts against his chest. The supple flesh of her hips pressed to his. His cock was rigid and erect, and he was terribly ashamed of his state, but also helpless to control his reaction. His breeches did nothing to hide the effect of her nearness, he feared. He was burrowing into her skirts, little better than any rakehell.

Graham’s restraint—worn even thinner with every secret meeting they had shared—snapped. His tongue searched the seam of her lips for entry, and she surrendered with a moan that made him harder still. She opened to him, and he plundered. Delicious. She tasted of hothouse pineapple and sweet, ripe strawberries from breakfast and Hannah. Honeyed, seductive, innocent, wondrous Hannah.

He could not get enough. Graham kissed her until the restless sounds of her mare intruded upon their idyll, reminding him the horse was not yet tethered. He broke the seal of their lips at last.

Hannah gazed up at him, her hat terribly askew, lips rosy and swollen from their kiss, eyes glistening. “Why did you stop?”

*Indeed.*

He could kick himself for ending their kiss so prematurely. However, there was the matter of her mare. And of the necessity that



their meeting remained a secret. For the moment, at least.

“If your mare wanders off, how shall we explain where we have been?” he asked, tracing a finger down the soft curve of her cheek. “We must see her settled, and then we can enjoy our time together, however brief.”

A smile quirked her lips. “How right you are. I fear I quite lost my head just now. What must you think of me?”

He did not hesitate in his response, which was torn from the deepest vault of his soul. “That you are the other half of me, the half that is too good, the half I fear shall forever remain out of reach because I am undeserving.”

“Graham,” she said, her countenance going utterly serious.

All the mirth and the happiness had fled her. She was the picture of solemnity.

“Yes, darling?” he asked, unable to keep himself from kissing her again.

Just one sweet, stolen brush of his lips over hers.

## Chapter Seven



*Now*

OF ALL THE men with whom she could have unexpectedly collided on her return from escorting Adele back to her chamber for the night, she had managed to find *him*.

“Graham,” she said his name aloud, breathless.

She told herself the breathlessness was because her collision with his rigid chest had taken her by surprise. Robbed her of her ability to speak. Not because his nearness stole her breath. Not because the sear of warm, male strength through his shirt—*heavens*, he was not even wearing a waistcoat—sent the desperate urge for him to kiss her again rushing over her.

Of course not.

“Lady Fawkesbury,” he acknowledged coldly.

His formality, too, was a shock to her senses. A reminder that she did not know him. That she had never known him. It had been five years since he had been her lover. Since he had disappeared from her life when she needed him most. And it had been only hours since their lips had parted.

She was still his fool.

How she hated the bitter truth.

She attempted to step away from him, but his hands remained upon her waist, anchoring her to him. “Do let me go, my lord,” she demanded.

“What are you doing, wandering about in the darkest depths of the night?” he asked, keeping his voice hushed and low, lest they be overheard.

Even so, with every moment they lingered, anyone could come upon them. Ruin loomed.

She must think of Addy and Evie, she reminded herself.

Her chin went up, a new defiance overtaking her. “What I am doing is none of your concern, Haven. Release me, if you please.”

“Where is your chamber?” he asked instead of heeding her. “I will escort you to it.”

The scent of him made an unwelcome heat flare deep within. Longing slid through her. She told herself to stop touching him. However, her hands refused to obey. He had always been a large,

strong man. But he had filled out the promise of his broad form. His muscles flexed beneath her touch now, as if he sensed the wicked direction of her thoughts.

"I do not require escort," she managed to say past lips that had gone suddenly dry. "I can manage on my own, Lord Haven."

Still, she did not move. Nor did he. Whatever he had dropped in the commotion—something heavy, from the sound of it—remained unheeded on the floor. He seemed in no hurry to retrieve the fallen object.

His head lowered incrementally. She saw his shadow drifting nearer, felt the hot sweep of his breath over her lips like a phantom kiss. "Damn you, Han."

Anger vibrated in the decadent rumble of his baritone.

She knew the feeling. She was furious with him, too. How could she hate him, rage against him, and yet want him so? How could every instinct within her be screaming to rise on her toes and slam her mouth against his?

The attraction between them had always been thus. Magnetic. Profound. From the first time she had ever been introduced to her brother's Eton friend, she had felt as if she had found the other half of herself. And although he had proven her desperately wrong, that same, visceral connection remained.

She could not deny it any more than she could deny him.

"I hate you," she whispered.

But in truth, she did not. How she wished her feelings for him were so simple, so uncomplicated. Love did not dissipate with ease. Her love for him had remained constant and true, despite his betrayal and four years of misery as Fawkesbury's countess.

"You want me," he murmured back.

Not a question, but a statement. An accurate one. He was the other half of her. He always had been. A deep, desperate understanding reached her in that moment, standing in his arms in the blackness of the night, here in the inner maze of the grand house's halls, where no windows aided in lighting the way. Until she breathed her last, she would always long for him.

"No," she denied, even as she could not seem to muster the desire to tear herself from his grasp.

Because part of her wanted him to hold her forever.

Instead of pushing her away or releasing her, he hauled her nearer, crushing her breasts into his chest, her legs tangling in his much longer ones. Against her rose the proof of his ardor. His cock was a prominent, thick ridge digging into her belly. More heat pooled inside her. She slammed her thighs together, trying to drive away the sensation.

All she did was discover the evidence of her own desire: she was wet for him. Each movement only seemed to stoke the fires of her need even more.

“Yes,” he countered. “Tell me the truth, Han.”

Their lips were almost grazing now.

“Tell me you want me as I want you,” he persisted, his voice a sensual promise of what was to come.

And that was the trouble with being beneath the same roof as him. The trouble with listening to his voice, with standing near to him, with kissing him in the garden and touching him in the inky murk of the night. It all brought back memories. A flood of remembrance.

“Yes,” she admitted, much to her shame. “I want you.”

His mouth was on hers, hard and demanding. Almost punishing. The kiss was deep, carnal. This was a bedchamber kiss. A kiss that claimed. A kiss that promised.

She opened, desperate for him, hating herself even as she melted beneath the ferocity of his lips. Her fingers clenched his shirt, and before she knew what she was about, she was grasping handfuls of it, hauling him closer still. She wanted to be as near to him as she could be, bare skin on skin. Him atop her.

Her marriage with Fawkesbury had been passionless. Thankfully, her husband had been more concerned with gambling than he had been with bedding her. But on those awful occasions when she had suffered his touch, often after he had hurt her first, she had lain painfully still and endured.

Graham brought her to life in the way only he ever had. And for one mad, selfish moment, she wanted him to banish all thoughts of what had been. She wanted to feel desired again. She longed for passion. She wanted him in her bed.

*One more time*, whispered a voice of sin within.

*What would be the harm?*

As if he had heard the question, he withdrew, ending the kiss. But he did not retreat far. The heat of his breath taunted her. She could close the distance between them with such ease. Put her mouth back on his.

“Take me to your chamber,” he said in a soft command.

Once again, there was no question in his words, only statement. But she did not fear Graham, not in the sense of his physical strength. He would not hurt her in that way. She could trust him with her body. Just not her heart.

She hesitated, trying to make the right choice. Trying to put Addy and Evie ahead of herself. But then the creak of another door opening down the hall sliced through the moment. She no longer had time to

decide.

The knowledge she did not dare allow herself to be caught kissing him after midnight trumped all other thoughts. She released his shirt, took his hand in hers, and pulled him after her.

In a handful of steps, they were at her door, a slice of light visible beneath from the lamp she had left burning within when she had left to return her sister to her chamber. It seemed a lifetime ago now as she tugged Haven inside with her, closing the door hastily at his back.

Addy had been correct. The distance between their chambers had not been far at all. But enough steps for trouble. Enough steps for everything to change.

She and Graham eyed each other in tense silence. The low light of the lamp was a warm shock after the darkness of the hall. Their breaths were similarly ragged. He was sin personified, clad in nothing but his shirtsleeves, sans cravat, the short line of buttons at his throat open to reveal a delicious glimpse of the chest she had been admiring with her hands not long ago. His breeches hugged his muscular thighs, and his cock protruded in blatant invitation. He looked at once indecent and wonderful, so handsome, she ached. Their kiss had affected him every bit as much as it had her.

An answering pang echoed in her core.

The golds in his red hair were alight, dancing, it seemed, making him look as if he were Helios come to bless a mere mortal with his blinding beauty. His eyes were the shade of a summer sky, burning into her.

"I still hate you," she told him, daring him to contradict her.

His jaw hardened until she imagined it could slice right through anything it touched. "Our enmity is mutual, madam."

Fair enough. He did not like her. She did not like him. Hannah still failed to see how he could possibly harbor a grudge when he was the one who had trespassed against her. But that was a question to ponder later.

Because she had already made her decision the instant she had decided to bring him to her chamber. She was going to lie with him. One more time. She was going to remember what it felt like to be wanted. She needed to exorcise the old memories of hands that gripped too hard, of fingers pulling her hair, of the humiliation she had endured at the hands of Fawkesbury.

For tonight only, she was going to indulge. To give herself what she wanted.

"I brought you here to avoid being discovered," she told him, as if it mattered.

They both knew she was prevaricating. Bluffing. He had always understood her body's responses to his. He had always known her

better than she knew herself. And that was why she was so defenseless, so weak.

"Tell yourself that, darling." The smile he gave her was one-half snarl.

He gripped his shirt in his fists and pulled it over his head, baring his chest.

Her eyes devoured him. Little wonder he had felt strong. His chest was superbly defined. Lean and long, slabbed with muscle. He did not have the wiry body she had once known. Nor did he have the thick, hairy middle Fawkesbury had possessed, which had only grown as his love of vice spiraled increasingly beyond his control.

No indeed, Haven bereft of his shirt was a sight to behold. She swallowed, tamping down the urge to close the distance separating them and touch him.

"I am not your darling," she said, snapping herself out of the erotic spell he had cast upon her.

"No." His voice was sharp, his gaze penetrating. "You never were, were you, Han?"

Once more, she sensed a deeper meaning hidden in his words, one she failed to comprehend. But his fingers had traveled to the fall of his breeches now. And one by one, he was slipping buttons from their moorings.

Her breath grew alarmingly shallow, her pulse erratic. "Nor were you mine."

But she was loosening the belt on her wrapper. The knot came undone. Her dressing gown gaped. She shrugged it from her shoulders.

His gaze seared her, head to toe, skimming over her with as much power as a touch. "Perhaps we were both lying to each other, all those years ago."

She knew without a doubt he had been lying to her. She, however, had meant every word she had said. Every touch, every kiss, every caress. She had loved him then. She loved him now, though she knew him as a careless rakehell who had stolen her innocence. In the wake of his betrayal, she had been left with no other choice than to believe that was what he had been.

Tonight, she was no longer certain.

What she did know was that the past had no place here.

She wanted to forget.

"Perhaps," she agreed, for it mattered not. "One night, Haven. One night only."

He had yet to completely undo the fall of his breeches. Without plucking another button free, he stalked toward her instead.

"Tonight only, Lady Fawkesbury."

She flinched at his use of her title. Pressed a finger over his lips

now that he was close enough to touch. "Do not call me by that name. Not tonight."

Tonight, she was his Han. She was the lady she had once been, wild and free. Unafraid. The lady who turned to flame in this man's arms.

He kissed the pad of her finger. "Hannah."

And she was lost. She flung herself into his arms. Their lips reunited. The kiss was beautiful in its wildness. She gave herself over to sensation, to Graham. The years fell away. The anguish, the pain, the betrayal. She was doing this for herself. Rekindling the memory of who she had once been, resurrecting the passion which had been so glaringly absent from her life all these years.

And she forgave him, if only for one night, for a few stolen moments.

She told him with her kiss, with her lips and tongue. With her hands, wandering over him wherever they could. His firm rump, his strong arms, his broad shoulders. They kissed as if it were the first time their mouths had ever met and as if it was the last time they ever would.

Her questing fingers found the fall of his breeches, and she worked the rest of the buttons free as his tongue played with hers. When his cock sprang free into her hand, long and thick, velvet-smooth and warm, she moaned into their kiss. Her fingers tightened, grasping him at his root and stroking.

His hips pumped, and he made a low, heady sound of need. Yes. He was as desperate as she was. The love between them had been a lie. So too had been his promises he would find a way to persuade her father to allow him to marry her. The desire, however, had been all too real.

It was now.

Real and breathtaking.

Their kiss turned even more frenzied than before. Together, they removed the remainder of the barriers of cloth keeping them from what they wanted most. His breeches and stockings were gone, so too her night rail.

Clutching each other, still kissing, they somehow made their way to the bed. She was on her back, beneath him, Graham nestled between her thighs. Her first thought was that it felt so right, so familiar. How many times had she dreamt of this, of him, over the last lonely few years?

She wanted to tell herself this was temporary. An illusion brought about by her suppressed desire. That one night meant nothing. That she could take her pleasure the way so many men and women did, and think nothing of it tomorrow.

But that was a worry she would save for the sun.

Tonight, she had the only man she had ever loved in her bed, and she was remembering what it felt like to be wanted. What it felt like to be touched tenderly. To be savored and desired. She would fret over regrets when she did not have his big body pinning hers to the bed.

“Han,” he said her name as if it were a prayer as he dropped reverent kisses all over her body.

Down her neck, over her collarbone, to her shoulder, where he bit gently. Then back to her ear, where he tongued the hollow behind it and buried his face in her hair, inhaling deeply.

“My God, I could breathe in the scent of you forever, and it would still not be enough,” he said raggedly.

She believed his words, because she felt the same way about him. She clutched his shoulders and pressed her face to the silken strands of his hair. She had never seen another gentleman with hair such a rich, bold color. Every part of him was so unique, so perfect to her. Emotion swelled within her, along with the carnal need, before she could control herself.

She had missed him. *Dear God*, how she had missed him. His face, his voice, his scent, his touch, his body over hers, inside hers...

He was still kissing her as if she were a gift. As if she were a goddess fallen from the heavens for him alone. Lingering kisses over her breasts. He took first one nipple in his mouth and then the other, drawing on each so sweetly, nipping the hardened peaks with his teeth before licking away the sting.

Her fingers sank into his hair, so thick, so soft. Touching him like this was a dream. She had longed for him, how she had lain awake nights, recalling the way he had made her feel. Even through her anger, through all her hurts, though years passed, she had never forgotten.

His mouth trailed a path of decadent heat down her belly. His hands caressed her so gently, she could weep. He kissed her hip bone, caressed her inner thighs, spread them wide. She did not even have any chance to be embarrassed, to feel a hint of shame at the way he exposed her.

He lowered his head, his tongue dipping into her folds. The first lick over her desperate skin made her cry out. Dimly, she recalled where she was, that she must not be loud. She held the back of her hand over her mouth, stifling her moan. He parted her and sucked her pearl the same way he had her nipples.

Her hips bucked as liquid heat and molten need shimmered through her. She was filled with stars and light and radiance. Burning for him. Always for him. *Only* for him. His tongue flitted over her



core, and then he licked into her. Her heart pounded, everything within her tightening like a knot.

After so long, without desire, the pleasure was overwhelming, and she was already on the edge. When he returned to her pearl, flicking his tongue over her in slow, steady swipes, and sank a finger inside her, she lost control. His finger was deep, curled to find a place inside her she had forgotten existed. A decadent place, a reactive place.

She shuddered and came apart. Bliss crashed over her with such violent splendor she had to bite her hand to keep from crying out and alerting the entire wing to the illicit sins she was engaged in.

“God, I love the way you taste,” he said, still licking her and moving his finger inside her as the ripples of her spend chased through her.

She had no words.

The sight of him, his handsome face buried between her legs, undid her. It was as if the walls she had built around herself had come crashing to the ground. Her defenses were destroyed, nothing but rubble all around them.

She hungered for more. For him inside her. For everything that was wrong and bad and iniquitous. Everything that went against all her vows to herself. A final gift: him inside her. That was what she wanted.

As if he heard her thoughts, he rose over her, his powerful body tense, a beautiful study in angles and planes. In strength and muscle and tenderness, all at once. He guided himself to her entrance, the thick tip of his cock teasing her with a promise of fulfillment.

“Do you want me, Han?” he asked, his voice a feral growl.

His summer-blue eyes scorched her alive.

“Yes.” The sweet susurrus of her complete surrender seemed to hover in the air around them.

They were suspended in time. Or perhaps time ceased to exist. The past, the present, fell away. He slid inside her. One deep thrust, and she was stretched and full, so full of him. His mouth crashed down on hers in a hungry, carnal kiss. Their tongues tangled, and she tasted herself as he began moving within her.

Her legs wrapped around his waist. They fit together so perfectly, so naturally. It was as if they had not spent the past five years apart. They kissed as their lovemaking turned frantic. She twisted from the bed, trying to get him deeper inside her as he began a punishing rhythm. He reached between them and stroked her pearl.

She tried to tell herself she must not allow him to spill inside her.

Tried to recall the disaster he had made of her life before.

But then the wave of her next spend came crashing down on her, hard. She tightened on him, her legs locking on his hips as ecstasy

replaced all thought. Sensation rolled through her like the waters of a flood, in one huge rush. He drove into her one last time, and then the muscles of his back tensed. On a groan, he emptied himself within her.

And Hannah, fool that she was, held him there, to her, their sweat-slicked bodies united, hearts pounding in unison.

## Chapter Eight



*Then*

HANNAH'S FAVORITE ROOM in Falwyck Abbey's sprawling two hundred chambers was the library. On account of the terrible rains sweeping through the countryside that morning, Graham's note had instructed her to meet here.

It was fitting, she thought as she walked slowly down the wall of books, scarcely even perusing the spines of the volumes as she passed. Fitting she would be meeting the man she loved most in the place she loved best.

On the heavy, heart-thudding thought, she exhaled slowly.

It had not taken her long to realize the truth.

She had not confessed it to Graham just yet, of course. But she was sure of her feelings. Certain of the emotion running through her. The day he had pulled her into the apple tree, the first time he had kissed her, had changed everything. She had gone from a lady who was helplessly enthralled to a lady who was desperately in love.

And she was going to tell him.

*Today.*

If she had the courage, that was.

*You are going to have the courage, Han. Graham has strong feelings for you as well. Otherwise, he would not be pursuing you as he has.*

But no matter how many times she reassured herself that Graham's every action toward her had shown her how he felt for her, her stomach was nonetheless tied up in a half-dozen knots as she awaited him.

The door clicked open, and the air in the library changed. It fairly sizzled. Hannah spun about to confirm what she had already known without needing to look—Graham had come.

And oh, how handsome he was, cutting a dashing figure in his buckskin breeches, riding boots, and dark coat. Her heart pounded furiously at the sight of him, and she could not keep the smile from her lips any more than she could maintain the distance propriety decreed.

To say nothing of the fact they ought not to be alone together. Her lady's maid was otherwise occupied, and if they were caught, it would be the ruin of her reputation and a precipitate wedding for

them both. Chaperones were dreadful weights when Hannah could be alone with Graham. When she could touch him, kiss him, speak with him as she wished.

Her feet were moving now, flying over the thick Aubusson, taking her to his open arms. Would someone wander into the library and discover them? Did she even care? Questions and thoughts ceased to exist when he caught her to him, his gaze devouring her with greedy tenderness that made her breath hitch.

"Han," he said warmly, his voice vibrating with such undisguised delight that she could not help but to feel as if she were the greatest treasure, laid before him.

"Graham." She said his name with the reverence of a prayer as she buried her face in his neck.

Just above his cravat, she found the magical space of skin that was just him, and she inhaled deeply of his scent, so familiar and beloved. Only a day had passed between now and when she had last seen him alone, but it may as well have been a century for as much as every part of her rejoiced at his nearness.

"I missed you," he breathed into the crown of her head, placing a kiss there, his arms tightening around her waist.

The desperate urge to kiss his neck beset her, but she told herself she dared not be so forward. Thus far, she had been content to allow him to control the pace of their secret assignments.

Instead, she swallowed, tipped back her head to survey him. "I missed you as well. Were you riding this morning before the rains began?"

Hannah stifled a sudden pang of hurt at the possibility that he had gone riding without her.

"Your brother accompanied me," he said, as if reading her thoughts. "Else I would have invited you. I did not dare refuse him lest it rouse his suspicions."

The reminder of the secret they kept made her frown, stealing some of her joy at seeing him and being in his arms, held so close to his heart she could absorb the beats. "Do you suppose it shall always be thus for us, Graham? I am not certain I can bear to remain forever your secret."

Because she wanted more.

Far more.

Everything, in fact.

She wanted to be his wife. The mother of his children. Lady Graham. That was what she longed for most.

His countenance grew stern, his sensual lips tightening as his eyes searched hers. "Surely you cannot believe I would keep you a secret forever. What must you think of me, darling? That I am the world's

greatest cad?"

"Of course not," she hastened to assure him. "I think you are the world's finest gentleman."

He frowned. "I am hardly that, else I would not be sneaking about with you, meeting you in secret. I pay you insult, Han, with each meeting. I can scarcely bear myself any longer. I cannot fathom how you do."

He was torn. That much she could see. The urge to unburden herself to him could no longer be contained. Hannah raised a hand, cupped his jaw. "You cannot pay me insult, and I do wish you would not be so unfair to yourself. You are a good man, honorable and true. And I...I love you, Graham. You have stolen my heart forever. I will wait until you are prepared to ask my father for permission. I will wait for you as long as you need."

Perhaps it was presumptuous of her to assume he would speak to her father.

Or to suppose he would wish to court her, to ask for her hand.

But she did not think she mistook him. The last few weeks they had shared, both in London, and here at Falwyck Abbey, did not lie.

Could not lie.

Graham was hers, and she was his, and one day soon, she would be his wife.

His arms tightened, drawing her even nearer. "You...love me?"

He sounded dazed. He *looked* dazed.

*Dear heavens*, had she said too much? Too soon?

*Be brave, Hannah.*

She met his gaze, unwavering. "I love you. I think I have always loved you, from the time we first met."

"From the time we first met," he repeated.

"Yes." A sudden wave of shyness overwhelmed her. Her lips and tongue would form no further words.

"Three years ago," he said. "You were wearing a pale-yellow morning gown, and you were sketching. Your crayons had created hopeless smears on your skirts, but your drawing of the lake was beautiful."

He remembered.

Hannah's lips parted. "You told me there was rain coming, and you offered to carry my supplies back to the house."

"And you told me to go to the devil because you had yet to complete your work," he recalled with a rueful grin.

"I did not tell you to go to the devil," she denied, that long-ago day forever imprinted upon her memory. "I told you I would leave when I was ready."

His stare traveled over her face like a caress. So tender. So

intimate. So knowing. "You may as well have done. I know you well enough now, Han, to infer what you truly meant."

"You had only just arrived with Max," she said. "I was not certain I could trust you then."

Indeed, she had yet to have her presentation in those days. Her mother and father had filled her with the fear of scoundrels and rogues who might attempt to turn a lady's head. She had supposed he may have been one. How foolish she had been then. There was no man more trustworthy than Graham.

She would give him anything if he but asked.

"And what of now?" he asked solemnly. "Do you trust me?"

"With all my heart," she said, belatedly realizing he had not returned her affections. "Do you trust me?"

*More importantly, do you love me?*

"Utterly, Han." His head dipped, and their lips connected for a slow, moving kiss, before parting again. "I am in love with you, too. I think I have been from the day I saw you in your hopelessly ruined gown. But we were both of us too young. The time was not right."

"What of the time now?" she dared to ask. "Is it right?"

"Shall I speak to your father? Is it what you want?" His gaze searched hers.

Did he need to ask?

"Yes." Hannah rose on her toes, pressing her mouth to his once more.

What she wanted more than anything was to be Graham's wife. She wanted to love him forever. To give herself to him completely. To take his name, bear his children. That was what she longed for, what she desired more than anything else.

He broke the kiss, gazing down at her. "Yes you want to be my wife? Yes you want me to offer for you?"

"Yes." She kissed him again, happiness bursting inside her. She was a boiling teapot, running over. Emotions flowing everywhere. "Yes to both questions."

"Thank you, darling." He lowered his forehead to hers, pressing them together. "I will go to your father before the house party is at an end."

Her heart swelled with hope. "Do you promise?"

He nodded, solemn and handsome and everything her heart yearned for. "I promise, my love."

## Chapter Nine



*Now*

GRAHAM WOKE AS the earliest strains of dawn filtered in through gaps in the window dressings. The fire had died to nothing more than the glow of coals in the grate, and the air was cold. He was surrounded by golden curls. He held a sleeping, decadently naked woman in his arms. The scent of lovemaking lingered in the air. His cock was a rigid reproach, standing erect and ready.

He had made a horrible mistake.

More than one, as it happened.

A whole, damned series of them. And they always involved one woman.

*Han.*

Carefully, to keep from waking her, he disentangled his legs and arms from hers. She slept on, looking as peaceful and serene as an angel in the early morning's light. The bedclothes were rumped, and in her slumber, she had twisted them about her waist, meaning her breasts were on full display, her sweet, pink nipples puckered in the chill air.

Taunting him.

Calling for his lips.

His prick twitched, ever the traitor to his mind and heart. What he would not give to stay here with her in bed all day, to fuck her a dozen different ways and tell the rest of the world to go to the devil. But though he was every bit as crazed with wanting her this morning as he had been last night, without the accepting cloak of darkness, he had no excuse to remain.

He could not hide his follies when the servants and other guests began moving about, beginning their days. Bedding her last night had been a grave lapse in judgment. An aberration, he told himself, slipping from the bed at last.

But not even the frigid morning air on his naked skin was enough to wilt his erection. Nor was it enough to cool the fires of desire burning through him for her. Had he told himself he could bed her once? That he could banish the poison of wanting her by making love to her?

He was a fool.

Worse than a fool.

He had never been the sort of man who needed to find his hastily discarded garments in the morning and flee from a lady's bedchamber. But here he was, retrieving his rumpled shirt from the floor and slipping it over his head. His first mistake had been in kissing Hannah. His second had been in thinking he could make love to her and that it would somehow put an end to the irrational longing he had for her. That it would vanquish all the yearning eating him alive.

He slid on his breeches next, slipping the buttons into place on the falls. His third mistake had been spilling his seed inside her. His fourth had been remaining in her bed, dozing lightly, only to wake with a raging erection and the need to have her again. And his fifth had been falling asleep with her in his arms.

He cast another lingering look toward the bed. If he remained here much longer, he would easily commit a sixth by tearing off all his clothes, getting back into her bed, and waking her up with his tongue between her legs.

He ground his molars against an impending rush of desire and crossed the room to her side. Deriding himself as a fool all over again, he pulled the counterpane over her, all the way to her chin. She still slumbered on, likely exhausted after the night they had shared. Before he could stop himself, he bent and pressed a kiss to her brow.

She made a sweet murmur and shifted.

Damn it, he could not afford to wake her. He straightened, gathered up his stockings, and left her before he could not bear to walk away. In the even chillier gloom of the hall, he discovered the Latin treatise he had dropped last night. How right he had been that the volume would not aid him in his attempts to sleep, he thought grimly, as he retrieved it as well.

Hastily, he made his way back to his own chamber, reminding himself of the unnecessary scandal should he be discovered prowling the corridors at this time of the morning, wearing half of yesterday's attire. He had come to this house party to do what he had promised his brother he would do on his deathbed: to find a proper wife so that he could secure an heir and see to it that the Dowling family continued to hold the marquessate.

Familial duty had been important to Gervase, but he had died before he had married himself. As the last living Dowling in their line, Graham could not help but to feel the heavy weight of the responsibility upon his shoulders. His search for a bride had only recently begun.

On a sigh, he entered his chamber, closing the door at his back.

Thank God no one had seen him. He could not very well court a lady when he was wandering about the halls after bedding the widow



he could not forget. No matter how hard he tried. Tossing the book and his stockings upon his bed, he stalked across the room to the wash basin and pitcher.

A splash of cold water on his face did nothing to replenish him. Nothing to help him forget. He could still taste her on his lips, for God's sake. And when he tried to envision the unattached ladies present at the house party, all of whom had seemed excellent prospects for a future marchioness before he had spied Hannah across the crowded ballroom, he could not even see their faces.

All he saw was *her*.

All he wanted was *her*.

But he could not marry a woman he could not trust, even if she was free once more. And he most certainly did not dare trust her, he reminded himself. She had chosen a title over a second son. And now she could rot with the choices she had made.

He would find someone else. He would forget all about her. He would dance attendance on every eligible lady he could bloody well find at this house party. Because he had to. Last night was an aberration which would not—could not—be repeated.

If only he believed those words.



COLD AFTERNOON AIR kissed her cheeks as Hannah trudged on the snow-packed path. The day was cold and gray and grim, the perfect reflection of the storm rioting within her. The need to escape the company of the revelers had been overwhelming.

She had risen that morning to the memories of what she had done in the night. To the scent of Graham on her pillow. Alone.

He had left her.

She had told herself it was just as well. That what had happened had been a rare deviation from the moral, proper path she had been walking for the last five years, first as Fawkesbury's wife and now as a respectable widow. But the desire he had brought to life within her belied those words. She was so very vulnerable when it came to him. Nothing had changed. Worst of all, she knew if he came to her again tonight, she would have a difficult time turning him away.

Even after this morning's disastrous breakfast.

He had not even glanced in her direction. Indeed, he had acted as if she did not exist. Instead, he had danced attendance upon Lady Octavia Wilmore. Later, when the drawing room entertainments had commenced, he had been flirting with Miss Constance Shipley.

Hannah had told herself she did not mind. That she had no wish for him to ever look in her direction again, let alone speak to her or

touch her. He was here, as all the unwed gentlemen were, to find a bride. She was here in Oxfordshire to watch over her sisters and make certain they did not make the same mistakes she had, both five years ago and again last night.

However, no matter how many times she had sternly admonished herself, she had still found her gaze drifting toward him. Finally, assured of her sisters' participation in the afternoon's entertainments, she had excused herself from the day's drawing room games. In need of distraction and some bracing winter air, she had donned her pelisse, hat, gloves, and boots, and she was now walking.

The path she trod led to the false ruins. But if there were other guests within seeking solitude or—worse—an assignation, she would simply turn around and return to the main house. She was not fit company for anyone at the moment.

As if sensing her inner turmoil, the skies opened, and a freezing rain began to fall, adding to her misery. The false ruins loomed ahead, her only hope of escaping the wrath of the storm as the rain began to fall in earnest. Hurrying her pace, she made her way inside the entry hall just in time for the skies to open, unleashing a grim torrent of icy deluge.

"Is anyone there?" she called out, her voice echoing in the silence.

No one answered.

"Is anyone within?" she tried again, raising her voice.

There was a fire burning at the other end of the hall and a trio of rooms on the first floor. If anyone was within, it seemed they were either upstairs or holding their tongues. Thank heavens the hosts—Mr. Winter and Lady Emilia—saw to it that their servants kept fires burning in the ruins lest any of their guests sought it out as a haven.

She took off her pelisse, gloves, and hat, then made her way deeper into the charming space, which had been carefully designed to look as if it were centuries old from the outside, but which was in truth quite comfortable on the inside.

She slipped into a small salon, where she found another happily crackling fire and a low-burning lamp. It seemed the ideal space to settle down with the book she had brought from the massive two-storied Abingdon House library. And to spend a half hour of blissful solitude, shutting out from her mind all thoughts of Graham and the night of spectacular passion she had spent with him.

A night which would not be repeated.

A night which had been a terrible mistake.

Just as she settled into a chair at the hearth, the sound of the outer door opening and closing reached her, a prelude to the end of her peace. She rose, clutching her book, and faced the door,

wondering who else would have ventured this far from the afternoon's activities. Lady Emilia had proven herself an excellent and most gracious hostess.

Footsteps drew nearer, sounding boot-clad and far too heavy to belong to a lady in the gathering. For a wild moment, some rebellious part of her hoped it was indeed a gentleman. One who was unattached. One who might kiss her soundly and erase all traces of Graham from her mind and heart.

But she knew that was utter folly. Sheer ridiculousness. She could no more countenance kissing another man than she could taking the risk of such a scandal. For her sisters' sakes, she had to behave with caution, circumspection, prudence...

There, on the threshold, stood the source of all her inner consternation.

He wore a tall hat, a greatcoat, and perfectly polished boots, and even though he had clearly been caught in the rains and was soaked, water dripping from him to create a fast puddle on the floor, he stole her breath. He was so handsome.

How she hated him.

"Han," he said, his voice hoarse.

She did not think she mistook the longing vibrating in it. The sudden rush of heat his appearance and his baritone sent through her was most unwanted. If only he did not affect her.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, attempting to keep her voice cool. "Did you follow me?"

Her hands trembled, and she found herself grateful for the book she had brought with her. She held it now as if it were a shield.

He said nothing for what seemed an interminable span of time. He merely stood there, dripping, staring at her. His jaw was rigid, his expression unreadable. And then, suddenly, he tore his hat from his head and shrugged off his greatcoat.

"I tried to stay away, damn you," he growled, striding toward her.

Her instinct told her to run. To flee him. To save herself.

But the rest of her refused to obey. Hannah remained rooted to where she stood, leather-bound volume in hand, watching as he closed the distance between them.

## Chapter Ten



SIXTH MISTAKE: LEAVING the warmth of the drawing room and all his prospective brides behind to follow Hannah through the afternoon's looming storm.

Seventh mistake: trailing her footsteps here to the false ruins, far from reason and propriety and all the other house guests.

Eighth mistake: following her inside.

The ninth was walking toward her instead of turning away. The tenth was taking her in his arms. She had been holding a book in her hand upon his entrance, and in an echo of his actions the night before, she dropped it to the floor now. It landed with a disregarded thump.

Hannah's arms went around his neck too, and he could not help but admire the press of her lush curves against his chest. His hard cock nestled into her softness. Instantly, he remembered how it had felt to be buried deep inside her tight heat. To lose himself. To spill his seed.

He had dismissed all the lessons he had learned five years ago for one night of indulgence. For one night in her bed. He had been reckless last night. Careless.

*Stupid.*

And he was going to be all that and more, again. Mistake number eleven... He claimed her lips with his. This kiss was fast, furious. A testament to how desperately he wanted her.

His determination to ignore her and to turn his mind instead to the task of wooing a bride had dissipated the moment she had entered the room at breakfast. His every good intention had fled. He had done his damndest to listen to Lady Octavia's chatter. But secretly, Hannah had commanded all his attention. In the drawing room, he had been attempting to pay heed to Miss Shipley. But he had not heard a bloody word she had uttered.

He had spent all the time since leaving Hannah's bed that morning thinking about her. Longing for her. Needing to take her all over again, in spite of everything. In spite of logic, reason, past pain, her betrayal. Despite the fact that he could not trust her.

She did not taste like betrayal now as she opened for him on a sensual moan, her lips clinging, her tongue moving against his. She tasted like the sweetest, most decadent dessert he had ever tasted. She tasted like everything he had ever wanted.

Because she was.

*Damn her*, she was.

How could he not desire her? How could he have believed one night would ever be enough? What was it about her that made her so different from all the rest, even when he resented her, even when he knew she was no good for him?

*Love*, said the bitterly taunting voice within.

The same voice that had led him to her yesterday in the gardens. The same voice that had lured him into her chamber last night. It was the voice that had told him to stay in her bed, the voice that had instructed him to trail her here. An old voice. A voice he had not heard since he had seen her last.

They crossed paths in a ballroom, and he was right where she had left him.

*Hers*.

*But she had never been his, had she?* asked that voice, in an echo of the question he had posed her the night before.

No, she had not. He had no reason to be here, holding her now, kissing her... Except he could not be anywhere else. He was drawn to her as he had never been drawn to another. It was irrefutable. Undeniable.

She smelled of lavender and lemon and the earthen freshness of rain, the crisp air of the outdoors. She kissed him back with the same ardor, clutching at his shoulders, drawing him closer. He may as well admit it. He had never stopped loving her. All his rage and resentment had sprung up from that lost love, which had festered within while she spent years as another man's wife.

He stopped kissing her then, staring down at her, his cock pulsing with need, ballocks drawn tight, heart racing. Her expression was as dazed and befuddled as he felt. Her gray eyes were dark with desire.

"Why?" he asked her, the one question he had promised himself he would never ask her.

The one question that had been haunting him ever since the day he had learned she had become Fawkesbury's wife without warning. A special license, a hasty marriage, and she had been forever out of his reach, when he had believed they had time, all the time he would need to persuade her overzealous papa that he could make an excellent husband to her, second son or no.

"I might ask you the same question," she said at last, blinking, as if lucidity were slowly returning to her after she had been slumbering. "Why did you follow me here? Why do you keep kissing me?"

He wondered if she had deliberately misunderstood his query or if she was entrenched in the present while he was still tormented by the past.

Instead of answering her, he issued another question, a far more pertinent one, to his mind. "Why do you keep kissing me back?"

She could not deny that her response to him was every bit as strong as his was to her. How transparent she seemed, and how odd it was. In this moment, he could not help but to feel no time had passed at all. That she was the same Hannah she had always been, the Hannah he had sworn he had known better than he knew himself.

"I..." She faltered, her gaze searching his. "Because you rob me of my wits."

He knew the feeling. *By God*, he did. It was the same for him. Graham supposed it was fortunate indeed Fawkesbury had kept her to the country. If they had crossed paths when she had been married to another...

But he could not think of Fawkesbury now, that damned pompous villain who had devoted his life to drink and losing his coin at the tables. Because the earl was gone. And Graham's initial question of why to Hannah—why she had chosen Fawkesbury over him—did not matter for he already knew he would not receive the answer he wanted.

Instead, he kissed her again, tenderly, taking his time. He sucked her lower lip, kissed the sweet bow curving the upper. He kissed the corners, traced the seam with his tongue. On a sigh, she opened, her head tipping back. Her hands were on his face, burning him like the most seductive brand. She held him in such a gentle touch, as if he were precious to her. He wanted more. He slid inside, intent upon a clever seduction.

He did not want to rush. He wanted to savor every moment of this encounter. Because this one, he promised himself, would have to be the last. After this, he would tell her goodbye. He needed to start anew. To find a Lady Octavia or a Miss Shipley and make her his wife. To devote himself to being a good husband, a good father, to securing the future of the Haven title. To forget all about lost loves who could not be trusted.

The woman who had chosen another over him.

*By God*, it still rankled, knowing she had chosen to marry an earl when he had been set to wed her himself. When he had taken her innocence. She had denied him the chance to make things right between them. To be her husband, as he should have been.

He would worry about all this later. When his mind could fathom something beyond Hannah's warmth in his arms, her mouth beneath his, her body his for the taking.

When he had entered the chamber, he had scarcely taken note of anything but her. But now he was on a mission. He needed to find the most comfortable place to make love to her. Because make love to her,

he would. There was no other way this interlude could end. He would remind her who had loved her first. And in so doing, he would finally have his goodbye.

He kissed along her jaw, settling his lips on her ear. "Am I robbing you of your wits now, Han?"

She shivered, and he had his answer. But he wanted to hear her admission. He licked the whorl, then caught the upper shell in his teeth, gently nibbling. As he did so, he cast a cursory glance around the chamber. What a pleasant discovery—a fur rug of some sort laid before the hearth. The fire crackled in the grate, but it was no comparison to the fire raging deep inside him. He had to have this woman.

One more time.

It was a spell, a curse, echoing in his mind.

One more time.

"Say it," he demanded, kissing the hollow beneath her ear, a secret place that smelled deliciously of lavender and her. A place where he knew she was especially sensitive. "Tell me, sweet. Do you have your wits about you now?"

"No," she admitted at last, breathless, clutching his shoulders. "Damn you, I do not. This...we...I cannot..."

He ignored her denial, kissing down her throat, gratified when her words trailed off in favor of a delicious moan instead. Yes. Surrender was what he wanted. What he demanded from her. She had thought she could control him. Rule him. And perhaps she had once. But not here. Not now.

He used his teeth on the sensitive nerves of her neck, recalling with ease just where she was most responsive. Her skin was delicious, smooth as velvet, an erotic art all itself. He found her pulse, hammering a staccato against the hollow at the base of her throat. His tongue traced over that vital thrum.

"Shall I go, Han?" he asked softly.

He was taking a risk, and he knew it. She could tell him to go to the devil, and he would honor her wish. He kissed her neck, awaiting her answer, inhaled deeply of her scent.

"No." Her admission emerged almost as a cry. "Do not go. Stay. Please."

Her words spurred him in a way nothing else could. She wanted him. Again.

He took her lips, kissed her deeply. Kissed her and kissed her as his thoughts whirled, as he fought to keep control of himself in this maelstrom of emotion and sensation, of past and present. This mammoth collision of who he had once been and the man he had become.

And as he slanted his mouth over hers, he knew the sweet taste of triumph, mingling with their entwined breaths. All her protestations last night had been for naught. He could have her now if he wanted. And he wanted. *Good God*, how he wanted.

But through the mad lust raging through him, he suddenly realized what he must do. He could not take his pleasure with her as he so desperately wished, for last night and today had proven to him that he was as vulnerable to this siren as ever. He would make love to her now, and he would want her again tonight, and then the next day, until he was once more wrapped up in her, lost in her, and the years fell away.

She had torn him down, like a tree felled by a storm, the last time. He was not certain he could survive a second round. No, indeed. Making love to her, as much as he longed to sink inside her once more and fuck her until he was mindless and breathless and oblivion overtook him, was not the answer.

Leaving her was. Putting an end to this madness, once and for all, was. He was going to take her as far as he could without making her spend. And then he was going to abandon her. He would show her what it felt like to be left. To be forgotten.

Yes.

That was precisely what he had to do. Anything else would be sheer ruin for him. And he had far too much responsibility on his shoulders now to risk more with her. He had his duty to the marquise to remember. He had his brother's memory, the promises he had made to Gervase as he lay dying, to uphold. None of them involved losing himself in the same conniving jade who had stolen his heart five years ago, never to return it.

Without putting an end to their kisses, he guided them slowly, as one, toward the hearth. Toward the fur rug. He would pleasure her to the point of desperation, and then he would withdraw. Retreat. This would be the best farewell of all, one in which he took his revenge. One in which he made her hurt the way she had hurt him.

Strangely, the thought of vengeance left him feeling hollow. Stole some of his ardor. But he told himself the dampening of his almost violent need for her was a good thing. It would make it possible to walk away.

They reached the hearth at last, and he tore his lips from hers to stare down at her. Her waist was in his hands, her lips swollen and reddened from his ravishment of them.

"One last time," he told her, almost as breathless as she was. How she affected him. How she brought him low, much to his consternation. He wished he was impervious to her charms. Wished he had never loved her.



But none of those wishes did him one drop of good now.

“This must be the last time,” she agreed. “I cannot...my sisters are my responsibility. They must make good matches, and I could not bear to be the reason they found themselves forced into an unhappy union. I know all too well how difficult such a marriage can be to endure.”

What was this? She had been unhappy with Fawkesbury? Her seeming confession gave him no joy. Graham had never wished her pain. He did not wish for it now. What he did want—nay, what he *needed*—was to put an end to this madness between them. And there was only one conceivable means of doing so. He would have to find the strength. He would have to bring her low, take her to the edge, and then deliver the ultimate setdown.

He would have to walk away.

Wordlessly, he began stripping her of her afternoon gown, which was delicate and ornate and had not been at all the sort of dress one would wear to traipse about the countryside in the snow and freezing rain. Her stays and petticoat came next. Last, her chemise. He allowed her stockings to remain in place, held by nothing other than garters.

Briefly, he basked in the erotic beauty he had revealed: Hannah’s creamy shoulders, pale curves, the full swells of her breasts tipped with hard, pink nipples, the nip of her waist. Her hips were full, her thighs firm yet feminine, the place between them beckoning. Her mound was shielded by sleek golden curls, which he already knew were soft as silk to the touch. If he touched her there, he knew she would be dripping. If he licked her there, he knew she would be delicious.

Her hands were upon him, hungry, caressing. She was attempting to strip him of his clothing in the same fashion he had so quickly whisked away hers. He caught her hands in his, raised them to his lips for a kiss.

“Not yet, Hannah sweeting.” His gaze traveled the length of her, admiring. He could not deny the pure bolt of unadulterated lust which swept through him then.

Hannah had always been beautiful. But the pretty girl he had known five years ago paled in comparison to the breathtaking siren standing before him now. She was a naked goddess descended to drive him to distraction. Utter perfection. The earlier promise of her curves had been fulfilled, like a prophecy, only tenfold.

She was astounding.

He kissed her again, his hands on her breasts. He cupped them, weighed them, toyed with her hungry nipples. He caught the peaks between his thumbs and forefingers, rolling and tugging on them until she cried out, arching into him, thrusting her breasts forward like the

most beautiful offerings.

He wanted to accept. Bloody hell, he wanted to accept all of her. But he could not, and he knew it. This was his chance. He had to remain strong. Impervious to her lures.

He bit her lower lip, tugging.

She hummed her approval. His Hannah was a little tigress, and there was no mistaking that. Part of him hoped her husband had appreciated her, and part of him hoped like hell the bastard had never seen this side of her.

He kissed her longer than he should have, knowing what he planned. Kissed her until he, too, was breathless and witless, his cock once more raging against the imprisonment of his breeches, longing to be sheathed within the warm, tight welcome of her cunny. But that was not meant to be, he reminded himself.

None of it was. She was not. He was not. They had never been. It was better this way. Better for them all. No chance of broken hearts, disappointment, betrayal. No chance he could be hurt once more.

Graham broke away, gazed down at her. Hannah's cheeks were flushed a pretty pink. Her eyes were wide, lashes low. If her lips had been swollen before, they were almost bruised now, dark red and so full. In her garters and stockings, the rest of her bare, she was vulnerable but so damn beautiful, he could scarcely look at her, knowing he was about to leave her here.

She deserved it, he told himself starkly. She deserved humiliation. Loneliness. She deserved to have her vulnerability turned against her like a brutal weapon. She deserved to lay there naked, begging him, wanting him, and knowing he would never fuck her again.

As if she sensed the horrible bent of his thoughts, she frowned. Her hands were back on his face, cupping, caressing.

"Graham?" she asked hesitantly. "Is something amiss?"

Everything was amiss, he could have said.

*Every. Damned. Thing.*

"I was not good enough for you," he forced out. "When I was a second son. When I had no title to claim. Is that why you want me now? Because my brother is dead and I am the marquess? Tell me the truth."

"Your title?" She searched his gaze. "What are you talking about?"

"The reason why you refused to marry me," he bit out, knowing he should not indulge in this argument. Not here, not now, not ever. He had his revenge, so prettily revealed, awaiting his move.

What the hell was he doing?

"I never refused to marry you." Her frown deepened, her gray eyes turning fathomless. "And you never asked me. Later, I begged

you...I wrote you..."

"Stop." He took a step from her as if she were made of flame and he feared getting burned. Not so far removed from reality. "No more of your lies, Hannah. No more of *you*. Find someone else to charm with your witch's wiles. I need to find a respectable lady to make my marchioness. You would do well to keep your distance from me from this moment on."

She flinched as if he had physically struck her.

And he felt as ill as ever.

But he could not remain. All his plans splintered. All his thoughts fragmented. He was a tattered wreckage of himself, so mangled and twisted and lost and confused, all because of her. He hated her. He loved her. He had to get away from her.

"Goodbye," he said, and this time, he meant it.

He was leaving this room, these ruins, this house party, the whole blasted countryside. He had been a fool to ever suppose he could walk through fire without getting scorched. She had burned him from the inside out, and enough was enough.

He spun away from her, stalking from the chamber. He was going back to London. Where he belonged.

"Graham," she called after him. "Wait."

He ignored her pleas. Leaving his hat, his greatcoat, and most importantly of all, his past behind him, he stalked back into the frigid storm. The punishing lash of rains greeted his face. He welcomed it.

Welcomed the pain.

Because he still had the hope that at the end of it all, he would be free. At last.

## Chapter Eleven



*London*

*Two months later*

SOME MISTAKES DID not bear repeating.

Hannah reminded herself of that particularly painful gem of wisdom as she waited in the entry hall of Belvedere House, the London residence of the Marquess of Haven. Although she was dressed for the biting cold, which had been holding all England in its relentless grip, she shivered, her gloved hand creeping over her abdomen.

Then again, she supposed some mistakes were worth repeating.

She could only hope the outcome this time would be better than it had been five years ago. Lying with Graham again had been foolish. And she had never felt more the fool than when he had left her, bereft of all her clothing, at the false ruins back in Oxfordshire. The bitter sting of his rejection had been most keenly felt when she had finally restored her garments and made her way back to the main house, only to discover that Graham's carriage was being readied, and he was returning to London.

His butler returned, grim-faced. "I am sorry, madam, but his lordship is not at home."

Graham's rejection of her call came as no surprise. She had hardly expected him to welcome her after the nature of their last parting. He had accused her of being a liar, after all, and he had left her, naked and vulnerable, without a backward glance. Without an explanation.

But she needed to see this through, and she knew it. There was a very important reason for her call. She had not braved the return travel to London from the country through the most chilling cold imaginable, on nearly impassable roads, just to be turned away. Thank heavens the winter ravaging the land had relaxed its fury long enough for her to find her way back to the city.

Back to Graham, if only for a moment until she left again.

"Please," she addressed his butler now, "tell Lord Haven that it is a matter of extreme urgency. Tell him Lady Fawkesbury refuses to leave without an audience."

The servant's lips flattened, his disapproval obvious. "My lady, I am afraid his lordship is not at home. If you would like to call another

day, perhaps tomorrow—”

“No,” she interrupted, not caring that she was being appallingly rude. “I cannot call another day, sir. I must see him now. Tell him the urgency of the call relates to the country house party we both attended some two months ago. Please.”

It was the closest she would come to an outright confession.

She did not want to have to inform Graham’s butler she was expecting his master’s child. But she would, if Graham forced her into it. She would do whatever she must to see him, to speak to him. Because while many of her mistakes of the past had been repeated since Graham had suddenly reentered her life two months ago at that ill-fated house party, there was one she refused to make.

She would not allow herself to be trundled into a miserable marriage once more. This time, when her courses had failed to arrive and she had begun to spend her mornings retching her breakfast into the chamber pot, she kept her secret to herself. And as soon as the weather permitted, she had begun plotting her journey.

Tears were blurring her vision now, as she had become quite the watering pot in her delicate condition. Perhaps she looked desperate. Or pathetic. Whatever the reason, Graham’s butler took pity on her.

There was sympathy etched in his countenance. “There is no need to cry, madam. I shall see once more...perhaps his lordship is...”

His words trailing off, the butler disappeared.

*Stop crying, you ninny*, she chastised herself. She had already swallowed enough of her pride in seeking Graham out. There was no need to further humiliate herself by begging him to see her.

If he refused her an audience again, she would go, she promised herself. She would send him a missive explaining the circumstances. He could do with the information what he wished.

Footfalls echoed, moving toward her quickly. She straightened her shoulders, dashed away at her irksome tears. But the footfalls returning to her did not belong to the butler.

Rather, they belonged to *him*.

Graham.

His bright-blue gaze was stormy as it met hers. His handsome face was a study in fury. “Why have you come here?”

She intended to tell him she needed to speak with him in private. She also intended to be calm and cool, to keep him from discovering how desperately her heart beat at the mere sight of him. But her emotions bubbled up within her, rather like a boiling kettle of water, and she was suddenly dizzy under the weight of it all.

Relief mingled with stress mingled with joy.

There was a ringing in her ears, and then the edges of her vision began to go dim. She felt as if she could not breathe enough air into

her lungs. And then, all at once, she felt herself falling, helpless to stop.



GRIMLY, GRAHAM CARRIED an insensate Hannah down the hall, shouting out orders to his staff as he went. Fear made his heart pound and his mouth dry as he made his way to a salon and gently deposited her upon a striped divan. What the devil was the matter with her? One moment, she had looked as if she were about to speak, and the next, her eyes had rolled, and she had been crumpling to the floor.

He had caught her before she had fallen completely, thank God. If she had struck her head on the marble...but no, he must not think of that now, for she had not, and he was eminently grateful he had been there to snatch her up. He sank to his knees at her side now, gently patting her cheek.

She did not feel feverish.

“Han,” he said. “Han, come back to me.”

She stirred, her head moving, eyes fluttering. A soft sound stole from her throat.

“Hannah.” He caressed her with the backs of his fingers, unable to help himself.

All the suppressed rage he had been keeping tamped down within him had roared forth when he had first seen her. Did she not know he had fled Oxfordshire with the intention of never seeing her again? Did she not know how badly he had ached for her these last two months? How much he had agonized over his decision to go? How much he resented her for making him want her so? What daring she had, he had thought, to come to his home, to follow him to London.

But then he had taken note of the sign of tears in her eyes, and the next thing he had known, she had been swooning. Holding her in his arms once more had felt right. Touching her now felt right, too.

Having her here, before him, a real woman rather than the chimera who had been haunting him these past weeks, also felt right. Better than right.

“Graham,” she said, as the life returned to her gaze.

“There you are at last.” Relief filtered through him, his heart slowing its rapid staccato.

She was still pale, but at least she had come to.

A discreet knock on the salon door alerted him to the presence of a servant bearing a tea tray, at his request. He directed her on where to place it and then asked her to close the door on her way out.

It was a breach of etiquette, he knew, even though Hannah was a widow. But he did not give a damn. Right now, all he wanted was

privacy and the opportunity to make certain she was uninjured and that she had not taken ill. Strange how quickly everything could change.

How had he ever thought he could resist her? And how had he ever believed that time and distance could heal his wounds when five years without her had failed to do so?

"What happened?" she asked, frowning at him, her expression befuddled.

"I was hoping you could tell me." He touched her brow a second time, just to reassure himself she was not burning up with fever. "You fainted."

"Oh." Her eyes fluttered closed once more. "Not again."

"Not again?" He could not keep the outrage from his voice. "What the bloody hell, Han? Are you ill?"

"In a fashion," she said, her lashes lifting to reveal those brilliant gray eyes of hers once more.

"What manner of response is that?" he demanded, his patience growing thin.

First, she had bombarded him with her presence, stubbornly insisting upon an audience with him, and then she had fainted. Her responses led him to believe this was not a new development.

"An accurate one." She flashed him a sad smile he could not read. "Will you agree to speak with me, Graham?"

"It would seem I have no choice in the matter, madam," he grimly observed, realizing belatedly that she was still wearing all her outer garments—pelisse, gloves, hat. The fur muff she had been clutching when he had first set eyes upon her earlier must have fallen somewhere in the entry hall, forgotten.

He set to work on the buttons of her coat, undoing them one at a time. Then he unwound a scarf from about her elegant throat and removed her hat.

"I can do that myself," she said, catching his hands in her gloved ones. "Stop and listen to me, Graham. There is something I must tell you, and then I shall be on my way."

*Dear God.* She was ill. Somehow, the thought of losing her, even when he did not have her—when he had *never* had her—hit him with the force of a fist to the midsection. His chest hurt. His lungs felt as if they could no longer hold air.

"What is it?" he managed to grind out.

He was still on his knees at her side, and their hands were linked. He tightened his grip on her, as if he could hold her there with him forever. A foolish, instinctive reaction from a man who was foolishly weak when it came to her.

"I am with child." Her statement was simple.

Shocking.

He felt as if *he* were about to swoon now.

He rocked back, staring at her. "Mine?"

She compressed her lips, meeting his gaze steadily. "Yours."

His eyes dropped to her stomach, hidden from his view by the drape of her gown. She did not look as if she were *enceinte*. It was almost impossible to believe his babe grew within her, a tiny life just beginning from their folly.

She was not ill. She was carrying his child. The consequences of his recklessness.

"My God," he said, for this changed everything. "We will marry at once, of course."

She shook her head. "No, Graham. That is not why I sought you out. I have already been entrapped in one unhappy marriage. I will not shackle myself to another."

He shot to his feet, indignation scoring him from within. Here again was the implication she had not been happy with Fawkesbury. But all he could think of was her refusal to wed him. To *shackle* herself to him, as she had said.

"You will marry me, and that is final," he bit out. "I will not allow my child to be born a bastard."

She stood, but when she swayed on her feet, he was there at her side, hands steadying her, keeping her from toppling over.

"Sit," he ordered her.

"No," she argued in stubborn, Hannah fashion. "I am perfectly capable of standing."

"You nearly toppled over," he countered. "What would you have done if I were not here to catch you?"

Twin flags of color appeared in her pale cheeks. "I would do precisely what I have been doing for the last two months without you."

Her words hung in the air between them, a recrimination.

He swallowed down a burst of shame. He had run from her. Had left her behind in Oxfordshire. It was true. He had been a coward, hell-bent upon saving himself. Hell-bent upon maintaining the shreds of pride he yet possessed rather than surrendering them all to her.

But running had not diminished his feelings for her.

Returning to London had not made him love Hannah any less.

"I am sorry I left you," he forced out. "If I had any inkling, I would have—"

"You would have stayed?" she interrupted, her voice tart, stinging. "What did you think might happen after you had lain with me, Graham? I should hate you for once more discarding me when you have had your fill of me, but I hate myself more for succumbing



to you a second time. The first time nearly killed me.”

Tears shimmered in her eyes, and her chin trembled.

*Damn and blast*, but he hated seeing her upset. Hated knowing he was the cause of it. The full implication of what she had just said settled over him. Once more, he felt as if they were having two different dialogues. Nothing made sense.

He caressed her back through the thickness of her coat, wishing it gone. “What do you mean when you say the first time nearly killed you? What are you talking about, Han?”

A lone droplet spilled down her cheek. “I miscarried five years ago. With the loss of so much blood, the doctor feared I would not survive.”

Five years ago?

Everything in him stilled as he struggled to understand. “I am sorry you lost a child with Fawkesbury, but I fail to see how the fault was mine.”

“It was not the earl’s babe,” she whispered, her expression stricken. “It was yours.”

The roaring in his ears returned. Denial surged. This could not be. She was lying. She had to be.

“If you were carrying my child, why did you not marry me?” he asked. “Damn you, Hannah. Why did you not wait for me? Did you truly care that much for a title that you would pass off my child as another man’s?”

If that were true, she was despicable. He should hate her for what she had done. If only he could.

“How dare you?” She pushed at his chest, shoving herself away from him. “Of course I never cared for a title. I cared for you. I loved *you*, Graham. But you did not love me. You left the house party without even a word to me. What was I to wait for? To hope for?”

He watched her stalk away from him, dumbfounded. “Of course I loved you, damn it. I wanted to marry you, and I had every intention of doing so. When word arrived of Gervase’s riding accident, I left a note for you. After I arrived at my destination, I sent you more letters, apprising you of the gravity of my brother’s condition. And then, suddenly, you were the Countess of Fawkesbury, and you were hiding away on his estate.”

She swirled about, turning back to face him. “I never received any note or letters. All I knew was that I was ruined and with child and the man I was in love with had left me without a word.”

“My brother was on his deathbed,” he ground out, thinking of Gervase, how he had lingered, pale and unconscious, for a week following his riding accident. Until at last he had succumbed. “I sent word before I left for Wiltshire. If you had but waited for me, you

would have had your title.”

She shook her head, going pale once more. “No, that is impossible. I received no note from you. I had not even realized anything was amiss with your brother until word of his death spread. By that point, I had already married Fawkesbury.”

He stared at her, a sick sense of understanding dawning.

Hannah had never cared that he was a second son. Her father, however, had. It had been her father who had denied his suit. Her father who had questioned how he would provide for Hannah as a second son of limited means.

Could it be possible that her father had intentionally driven a wedge between them, marrying her off to Fawkesbury instead with as much haste as possible?

“Did your father know you carried my child?” he asked.

He saw the precise moment realization hit her. “Yes. My lady’s maid told him and my mother both... You do not think...”

“That your father intercepted my letters and kept us apart?” He strode toward her, rage quaking through him at the thought of how they had been manipulated. At the thought of how they had lost five years, all because her supercilious bastard of a father had not wanted her to marry a second son. “Yes, Han. That is what I think. Nay, it is what I *know*. I had every intention of marrying you. When I lost my brother and then you, I was devastated.”

The grief had been crippling. Those had been dark days indeed, when he had not even been certain if he would survive. But somehow, he had pulled himself from the grips of despair.

Her inner struggle to accept the truth was reflected on her beautiful face. “Oh, Graham. I am so sorry.”

He pulled her into his arms where she belonged. Where she had *always* belonged.

A new, urgent determination pounded through him. “I am so sorry too, my darling. But I am going to make amends for all we have lost.”

And he knew precisely where he needed to begin.

## Chapter Twleve



HANNAH HESITATED ON the threshold of her father's study, dread unfurling within her. Part of her could not bear to take part in the dialogue that was about to happen between them. But another part of her knew she must. If she wanted the truth, she had to go directly to the source.

Fortunately, he had accompanied her back to London, which meant the answers she sought were only a few steps and a handful of pointed questions away. On a deep breath for strength, she knocked at the door.

When he bid her enter, she stepped inside, finding him poring over papers as usual, by the glow of a lone lamp on his desk. He rose at her entrance and offered her a formal bow. The Duke of Linross was a stickler for propriety.

How he must hate that all four of his offspring were wayward, she thought, curtsying in return. "Father."

"My lady. You look troubled. I trust you are not still ill?" he asked mildly.

Of course he would know she had been retching. She swore her father employed some of the servants as his spies. "I am indeed quite troubled. You see, I paid a call to the Marquess of Haven today."

Her father stiffened. "What were you doing with that scoundrel, Hannah? Will you never learn your lesson where he is concerned?"

If he only knew.

"It would seem not," she said. "He told me he asked your permission to marry me. He also told me he sent me missives, and that all of them had been returned to him, unopened. And yet I was under the impression he had left London without ever attempting to reach me."

She knew her father well enough to read his countenance. Everything Graham had told her had been true. She was certain of it.

"You deserved better than a second son, and one who had the daring to compromise you and get you with child," he clipped. "I was not about to allow that puppy to have you as his wife. Fawkesbury was a much better choice. You became a countess, Hannah."

"How dare you decide my future for me?" Her father's cool explanation infuriated her. Her hands balled into fists at her sides. "Fawkesbury himself was a scoundrel. All he cared about was drink and gambling."

"How dare I decide?" he snapped, his voice echoing through the study. "You had shown such excellent judgment, had you not? Allowing Dowling to ruin you. My God, Hannah. You must look at it from my perspective. You were in danger of becoming a pariah. I had to do what I deemed best."

Of course he would have believed his decision was best for her, all without taking into account what she wanted.

"You had no right to manipulate me, to keep his letters from me," she countered. "I loved him."

"You were foolish and naïve. Love is not the foundation of a good marriage." Her father's voice was cool. "I saved you from an untenable fate. You were with child. He was mourning Haven. The two of you could not have wed before it was too late."

"We would have found a way." Her voice shook. She took another deep breath, forging on. "We will always find a way."

She believed that with every part of her. Oh, how she believed it. She and Graham were meant to be together. Years later, even after being torn apart, each believing the other guilty of crushing betrayal, they had still come together.

"What are you saying, Hannah?" her father asked sharply.

"I am saying that I am in love with Graham Dowling, and I am going to marry him," she said, the words filling her with a sense of freedom she had not felt in years. "And there is nothing you can do to stop me this time."

With that, she turned and walked away.

She had allowed others to keep her from the man she loved for far too long already.



OBTAINING A SPECIAL license had been easy compared to spending the last few years away from the woman he loved, erroneously believing she had been a heartless title-seeking chit. Awaiting her return to Belvedere House at the appointed hour the next day, however, had proven the most difficult wait of his life. A lesson in patience.

And he was not a patient man.

Not when it came to Hannah.

Now that the truth had been revealed, he could not wait to make up for lost time. Could not wait to make her his. To that end, he had scarcely slept the night before. And he was pacing the length of his study now like a madman, checking in with his butler every ten minutes to find out whether or not Lady Fawkesbury had arrived.

It grated, having to call her by that hated name. But soon she would be his wife. His marchioness. The past could not come between

them ever again. No one and nothing could.

He paced back down the length of the study, praying the Duke of Linross would not attempt to intervene once more. Praying Hannah would not change her mind. That she would not swoon when he was not there to catch her...

He raked a hand through his hair, sure he was leaving it standing on end and not giving a damn. When Hannah had come to him and told him she was carrying his babe, all the broken shards inside him had come together. For the first time, his heart was whole.

All he needed was the woman he loved.

His wife.

The mother of his child. He was going to be a father. He still scarcely knew what to do with that beautiful, thrilling knowledge. It was almost impossible to believe that a mere two days ago, he had been hopeless, facing the unwanted prospect of selecting a woman to become his bride. Impossible to believe he had spent the past two months missing Hannah, believing any union between them unattainable because of her past betrayal, when all along she was the one who had been betrayed by her own father.

God, how he hated that she had suffered without him. That they had been torn apart, that they had spent all this time believing the worst of each other—

“Graham!”

At her soft cry, he spun toward the door, heart hammering. She had come to him. At last. And there she stood, everything he had ever wanted. The only woman he had ever loved.

His Han.

He strode toward her as she came running for him, and they met halfway, in the middle of his study. He took her in his arms and claimed her lips with his. It was a kiss of reunion and surrender, a kiss of hope and love and wonderment. Her lips seemed somehow softer than he recalled even from the day before.

They clung to each other, mouths fused. He thought he could kiss her forever. That he could hold her here and now, never let her go. How precious she was. Her sweet scent of lavender and lemons invaded his senses. Her warm, supple curves melted into his body. He could not wait to make love to her for the first time as his marchioness.

To make her his once and for all, just as he should have done the first time. Just as he would have done, had not a tragic series of events and the meddling of others kept them apart.

He ended the kiss at last, reluctantly, and held her face in his hands, simply drinking in the sight of her. “Is this a dream?”

The smile she gave him was soft, tinged with an odd combination

of happiness and sadness. "It is the dream I have been longing for, all these years. The dream I have been waiting for."

"You spoke with your father," he said, guessing the reason for the sadness. "What did he have to say?"

"You were right about his interference," she confirmed, her hands going atop his. "I am sorry, Graham, for believing the worst of you. I should have known you better than to believe you would abandon me. All I can offer in my defense is that I was young and frightened. My father told me I must either give up the child or marry a man of his choosing since you did not want me. I—I never wanted to wed Fawkesbury, and had I known you were coming back to me, I would have waited. I would have waited forever to be with you."

He pressed his forehead to hers. "You owe me no apologies. I dishonored you by compromising you. I had no right to be so reckless with you. Not five years ago, and not two months ago. When I am with you, Han, I am mad with wanting you. You are all I can see, think, feel. You absorb all of me. You own my heart now and always. I have loved you from the first moment I met you."

She bit her lower lip, her gaze searching his. "You love me?"

*Curse it*, had he not already said the words? In his heart, he had told her a thousand times over. Her name was written on its walls like a prayer. But as he thought back upon their exchange yesterday in the wake of her sudden swoon in his entryway, he realized he had not told her.

He would tell her now, this day, and every day forward, in as many ways as he could.

"Of course I love you, my darling." He kissed her again. Chaste this time, not daring to deepen it lest he forget where he was. Lest he forget they were about to marry here in the drawing room at Belvedere House in an hour's time. "How can I not love you? You have owned my heart all these years, all the time we were apart. When I saw you again in Oxfordshire, it was as if all the distance had fallen away. The rational part of my mind warned me I should not want you, but the rest of me did not listen. And I am heartily glad it did not. I will be forever thankful I followed you into the gardens at that ball. If I had not..."

He did not even want to finish the thought. If he had not followed her, kissed her...if he had not been unable to sleep...if she had not been returning from her sister's chamber...if they had not crossed paths when they had...if the door down the hall had not creaked open when it had...if he had not followed her into her chamber...

The *ifs* were endless, a waterfall of them. A reminder of how destined they were to be together. So many events had needed to happen in the precise manner they had in order for them to be

standing together now, about to become man and wife.

She rose on her toes then, startling him by capturing his lips in a kiss so possessive and fierce, it stole his breath. In this kiss, she was the aggressor, her tongue sliding inside his mouth first. She caressed his hands as she kissed him deep, and this kiss told him so much more than words could.

Belatedly, it occurred to him that she had not told him she loved him now, even as he had confessed his love to her. Her words of love had been in the past tense.

As if hearing his uncertainty, she broke away from him, gazing up into his eyes with that endless gray gaze. Ensnaring him. "I love you, Graham. I have loved you from the moment my ne'er-do-well brother first introduced me to his Eton friend. I have loved you even when you were gone. I loved you when I suffered through an intolerable marriage. I loved you still when I first saw you across the ballroom at Abingdon House. I loved you as you walked away from me that awful day. And I have spent the last two months loving you. I will never stop."

"Thank God," he said on a growl, taking her lips once more.

He kissed her with all the love burning inside him. He kissed away the years she should have been his and he should have been hers. He kissed away all the pain. He kissed her sweetly, tenderly, using his lips and tongue to show her how precious she was to him. An incomparable.

His heart.

And when their mouths finally broke apart once more, they were both more breathless than ever. They clung, gazing into each other's eyes with the giddiness of a man and woman who had looked into their shared future and found it laden with endless promise.

"I mean to make you my wife this morning," he told her.

She smiled. "Good. Because I intend to make you my husband."



"DEARLY BELOVED, WE are gathered together here..."

The drone of the minister's voice echoed throughout the mostly empty sanctuary.

Hannah still felt as if she were in a dream as she stood across from Graham in the church he had somehow managed to secure for their nuptials. She had no doubt a fair amount of coin had exchanged hands for this favor, along with the special license.

They had spent five years and two months apart, only to be reunited and joined in holy matrimony in the span of two days. Her sisters were in attendance, both of them having been in London for

some time now. Hannah's father had chosen not to attend. Her brother Maximilian was here, looking rather tap-hackled from Lord knew what iniquities he had been about the day before. As was Graham's friend Percy.

Hannah had eyes only for the man she was marrying at long last.

"Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife?" the minister directed his attention to Graham now, his voice and countenance equally solemn. "Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

Graham's brilliant-blue gaze seared hers. The smile he gave her melted her to her very soul. "I will."

The minister turned to her. "And wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

Her heart clenched painfully in her chest as she spoke the long-awaited words. "I will."

The remainder of the ceremony passed in a blur. Rings were exchanged. Psalms were read. Hands were linked. After what seemed an eternity, she was signing her name in the parish register. Together, she and Graham emerged from the church, husband and wife. Just as they always should have been.

He handed her up into his waiting carriage. As she settled herself upon the leather bench, she scooted nearer to the window. Even in the blistering chill of the cold, their guests spilled out of the church behind them, waving and smiling. Everyone was happy for them. She knew a brief twinge of sadness that her father had chosen not to attend and that her mother had yet been waylaid in Cornwall.

Perhaps, in time...

Her new husband settled himself alongside her in the carriage and promptly pulled her onto his lap, nuzzling her throat. There would be no wedding breakfast, and the hunger for him flaring to life within her was heartily glad for it. All she wanted was Graham. His kisses, his embrace, his love.

Now and forever.

He ran his nose along a sensitive part of her throat, his lips brushing over her ear. "You are sad about your father."

How had he guessed? Her hands settled upon his shoulders as the carriage rocked into motion, taking them back to Belvedere House. "I wish I could forgive him," she said honestly. "And I wish he could see how happy we are."

"Give him time, darling." He caught the fleshy lobe of her ear in his teeth. "Time has a way of breaking down even the most seemingly



insurmountable walls. Only look at us. Mere days ago, I had no hope of ever seeing you again. And now you are my wife.”

How handsome he looked, she thought. But she wanted the brilliance of his hair, the thick softness of it caressing her fingers. She plucked his fashionable Wellington hat from his head, laying it upon the bench at their side.

“My beloved husband,” she said with great contentment as her fingers trailed over his scalp, relishing the sensation of those thick, auburn locks. “Mere days ago, touching you like this was something I could only manage in dreams. And now you are here. And you are mine.”

He grinned roguishly back at her. “I have always been yours, Hannah love. Just as you have always been mine.”

“Yes,” she agreed, unable to refrain from kissing him then. She had been dying for his lips ever since she had kissed him last.

His tongue slid into her mouth, and she sucked on it, then bit his lower lip as he had done to her before. She was ravenous for him. Desperate, in fact.

“My dear Lady Haven,” he said, feigning alarm. “I do believe you are attempting to enjoy our wedding night prematurely. How shocking. One cannot make love in a carriage.”

His words sent a wicked surge of heat straight to her core. Her longing for him, like her love, would never die. She tugged lightly on his hair, feeling bold. “Are you certain one cannot make love in a carriage, Lord Haven? The last two months have left me so desperately lonely, so in need.”

As she said the words, she teased them both by straddling his muscled thighs. Her gown rode up around her, and beneath them she was bare aside from her petticoats, chemise, and stockings. It was true that the winter was so frigid, the Thames had frozen over. But she was not cold now. Not with so many layers and her husband to keep her warm.

“Perhaps you might persuade me, my lady,” Graham said then, his knowing hands gliding beneath her skirts.

He traced her seam, where she was aching for him, then stroked her pearl, his eyes locked upon hers, his breath a sweet curtain over her lips.

“Have I persuaded you yet, my lord?” she asked in a voice she scarcely recognized as her own as he sank a finger inside her.

“So wet, Lady Haven,” he said, humming his approval when she clenched on him, bringing him deeper. “Yes indeed, my darling, I do believe you have convinced me that nothing is impossible. In so many more ways than one.”

She kissed him swiftly. “Then make love to me, Lord Haven.”

He made another growl low in his throat, and then his mouth was back on hers. He withdrew his finger. There was a brief pause as he undid the fall of his breeches. And then, his thick, rigid cock was where she wanted him most, glancing over her slick folds, probing her entrance.

“Take me,” he ordered her. “All of me.”

Instinct guiding her, she sank down on him, hard. He impaled her in one thrust, so deep it stole her breath. The rightness of it washed over her, along with bliss. And gratitude. So much gratitude. With the carriage rocking around them, they began a rhythm, his hands on her waist to steady her as she controlled the rhythm and pace.

She was on the edge. The knowledge Graham was hers forever and she was his had brought her shockingly near to spending already. His fingers found her pearl again as they kissed and she rode him. A moan left her, and he swallowed it up, kissing her harder.

One more thrust, and she was coming apart. Losing control. Gasping for breath, she collapsed against him, her lips still pressed to his.

“I love you, Graham,” she said as she tightened on him, loving the feeling of his body inside hers, so demanding and rigid, filling her as only he could.

The spiral of pleasure was intense as it took her, and she surrendered herself to it. To him. As she shuddered and collapsed against him, he surged inside her, releasing his seed in a hot torrent.

“And I love you,” he whispered back in the aftermath of their passion.

They held each other tightly, bodies entwined as one, as their carriage lumbered through London, taking them home.

## Epilogue



HIS WIFE LOOKED weary but radiant. More beautiful than he had ever seen her. And what a bloody relief, at long last.

Graham had spent the last few hours in torment, pacing the floors, damn near tearing his hair out with every sound that had emerged from his wife's lying-in chamber. Thankfully, his brothers-in-law had been there to offer him support, along with a bracing glass of the finest smuggled Scots whisky a man could procure.

The result was that as he finally was allowed entrance to Hannah's chamber and his gaze settled upon the beautiful sight of Hannah holding their babe in her arms, he was no longer feeling murderous. Indeed, he was feeling thankful. And relieved. And in love.

So damned in love.

With his wife and the precious, swaddled babe in her arms.

"You have a daughter," Hannah proclaimed.

He saw a red face, eyes screwed tightly closed, a shock of brilliant orange-red hair, short as the fuzz on a peach. A tiny, precious nose that was a replica of his wife's. A chin that was stubborn like his. Golden eyebrows. Sweet little ears. Rounded cheeks.

He had to sit.

Thankfully, there was a chair behind his arse. Else, he would have fallen to a heap on the floor, so overwhelmed was he by the current of emotion flowing through him. He stared at Hannah, at the babe. *By God*, he was more in love now than he had been a minute ago. A breath ago.

"You are well?" he asked her. "The birthing, was it..."

"I am well," she said, saving him. Her smile was soft as she glanced down at the bundle in her arms. "I would endure it all over again, a hundred times, just to have her."

*Bloody hell*, she was far stronger than he could ever hope to be. Her resilience continually astounded him. Everything about her did, actually. He was so damned lucky she was his wife. He would wait the years it had taken for them to come back together, just to call her his. Just to sit here in this moment and fall in love with her again as he watched her cradling their daughter.

He cleared his throat. "I have no wish for a hundred children, my darling. Perhaps three. Four at most, I should think."

Hannah smiled at him, running her finger lightly against the babe's cheek. "She will most certainly need siblings. But first, she needs a name. What do you think, my love?"

"She needs a special name," he agreed, "for she is the one who finally brought us together, just as we should have been, after so very long."

"Yes she did," Hannah agreed. "What do you think of Gertrude? It is close in meaning to Gervase, in remembrance of your brother."

He stared down at the quiet, cherubic face, then glanced back to his wife, love rushing through him anew. "It is a perfect name for her, my love. Thank you."

Her smile went straight to his heart. "I hoped you would approve. It seems right."

Yes, it did. He stood then, going to Hannah, settling himself alongside her in the bed. He slid his arm around her, then kissed his daughter's soft crown before lifting his head. He was lost, once more, in his beautiful wife's eyes. "You were brave and strong and wonderful. Far stronger than I could ever hope to be."

She cupped his cheek. "You are my strength. Now and always."

He turned his head, kissed her palm. "And you are mine, for eternity. I love you both so much, my heart is bursting with it."

"Mine too," she told him. "I love you, Graham."

He had never known such happiness as he knew now, in this moment, with Hannah and their daughter within the circle of his arms. "And I love you."

Gertrude began to cry, the plaintive wail of a newborn infant lost in the strange new world into which she had been suddenly thrust.

He stroked his daughter's head softly, seeing so much of himself in her, feeling his heart swell in his chest. "I love you too, little one. Never fear. I love you, too."

Hannah laid her head on his shoulder, and a deep and abiding peace settled over him. At long last, they had found their happiness.

Together.

*The End.*

## Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading Graham and Hannah's story! I hope you enjoyed this seventh book in my *The Wicked Winters* series!

Please consider leaving an honest review of *Wooed in Winter*. Reviews are greatly appreciated! If you'd like to keep up to date with my latest releases and series news, sign up for my newsletter [here](#) or [follow me on Amazon](#) or [BookBub](#). [Join my reader's group on](#)

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Do read on for a bonus excerpt from [Winter's Wallflower](#), Book Eight in The Wicked Winters series, featuring the quiet Lady Adele Saltisford, the dangerous Mr. Dominic Winter, and a whole lot of steam, available [here](#).

Until next time,

*Scarlett*

# **Winter's Wallflower**

## **The Wicked Winters Book Eight**

By  
Scarlett Scott

He's the lord of London's underworld. She's the lady who deceived him. And now, there will be hell to pay...

Dominic Winter rules his empire with cutthroat determination, his heart as cold and dead as the January ground. Debts must be paid. Men must be loyal. Anyone who defies him will suffer the consequences, including the indolent aristocrats who frequent his establishments.

When a beauty boldly ventures into his lair and strikes a bargain with him to save an unworthy lord, Dom is captivated. Though his instincts tell him she cannot be trusted, soon, he will do anything to make her his. Until she disappears.

Desperate to save her beloved brother from ruin—or worse—at the hands of the despicable Mr. Winter, Lady Adele Saltisford offers herself in exchange. But one night of unexpected passion leaves her with dire consequences. Torn between her dangerous attraction to Dom and loyalty to her family, Adele flees London.

It doesn't take Dom long to discover the depth of her betrayal and give chase. This time, nothing and no one will stop him from claiming her. It's crime lord versus duke's daughter in a battle of the heart.

# Chapter One



*London, 1813*

LADY ADELE SALTISFORD'S virtue was a small price to pay for her brother's life.

She reminded herself of the undeniable truth of this fact as she waited for London's most dangerous man to see her. Her hands shook beneath her silk taffeta cloak, and she was grateful once more that she had not relinquished her outerwear to the hulking manservant who had ushered her to this anteroom. Her veil, too, was firmly in place, shielding her face.

Not that she expected to know anyone at a gaming hell dubiously called The Devil's Spawn to recognize her. Nevertheless, her brother had frequented this establishment. It stood to reason some of the society gentlemen who filled her dance card and flirted at musicales were also patrons. Difficult indeed to countenance, knowing what the fiend who owned it was capable of.

Maximilian had been badly beaten. Bloodied. The warning he had received had been dire. Mr. Dominic Winter did not care if Max was Marquess Sundenbury, heir to the Duke of Linross. Max owed him an immense sum, and he intended to collect. One week was all he had left to repay. Adele was not meant to have discovered him as she had in his bachelor's rooms. But when Mama had fretted over his failure to appear at supper one evening, Adele had taken it upon herself to pay him a call the next morning.

What she had witnessed had broken her heart. But Max had been determined he would not seek out their forbidding father for assistance with his plight. He had sworn he would find a means of repaying Mr. Winter before the villain's paid ruffians revisited.

The massive man returned, his expression forbidding as ever. If murder had a face, Adele was certain this man's was it. She eyed his fists, massive as ham hocks, and wondered if he had been one of the scoundrels who had beaten Max.

He crooked a finger, beckoning her.

Whilst the man who had initially answered the door she had rapped upon had been only too quick to speak, mistaking her for a woman of ill repute and informing her she had the wrong entrance, the giant before her had yet to utter a word. She eyed him now, heart

pounding harder.

Misgiving blossomed.

She was sure she ought not to follow this wicked-looking man anywhere. What if he had no intention of taking her to Mr. Winter? What if he led her to a private room and ravished her?

He made a guttural noise and stalked toward her. Adele told herself to be brave, but when he raised his massive hand, she feared a blow was forthcoming. She shrank into the wall at her back, hitting her elbow on the plaster in the process.

His hand wrapped around her arm in a grip that was not nearly as punishing as she had feared.

“Unhand me, you rogue,” she commanded.

But the manservant ignored her. Instead, he hauled her from the small room, pulling her into the hall with its gleaming wood floor and shocking, lewd paintings gracing the walls. “Where are you taking me?” she demanded, attempting to wrest herself from the giant’s grasp to no avail. “I demand to see Mr. Winter. If you dare to harm me, I shall have the magistrate upon you.”

The man made another sound in his throat, part dismissal, part feral growl.

But he did not break his stride.

She felt rather like a mouse being carried off by a cat. This could not end well for her, in any instance. They reached a door at the end of the hall and the man paused at last, rapping thrice.

“Enter,” called a deep, masculine voice.

*It was him.*

Adele knew, instinctively, who the voice belonged to. She had a heartbeat in which to prepare herself before the manservant opened the door and hauled her over the threshold as if she were the spoils of the day’s hunt.

There stood her nemesis. Mr. Dominic Winter. His back was to her. All she noted was his coat—black, the cut fine, tailored to precision. If she did not know him for a heartless thief and murderer presiding over a vast empire of similar criminals, she could have mistaken him for a gentleman in any one of London’s most exclusive drawing rooms.

Except Mr. Dominic Winter was no gentleman.

Not by birth, and certainly not by deed.

The thought of her brother’s bloodied visage was enough to make her shoulders go back, her chin tilt up. Though she was the quietest of her siblings, she was not weak. She loved her family, and she would go to battle for any one of them. She could face this demon and save Max.

She had but seconds to summon every modicum of courage she



possessed.

Mr. Winter turned. Slowly. As if he possessed all the time in the world. He moved with the innate grace of a large cat. With the predatory elegance of a lethal creature. But for although she had imagined his countenance to be hideous—a reflection of his inner defections—she had not anticipated the reality of this man.

He stole her breath, and not just because his very presence filled her with an ominous pang of fear. Rather, because of his appearance.

His dark gaze appeared almost black by the glow of the lamp. His hair was raven, his height immense, his chest broad, shoulders filling his coat. Even bathed in sinister shadow, she could see the plain truth of how wrong she had been. Mr. Dominic Winter was not a hideous beast of a man.

No, indeed. He was cruelly beautiful.

“That will be all, Devil,” Mr. Winter said curtly, his voice a lash in the heavy silence which had fallen.

The brute who had unceremoniously hauled her into the chamber released her and disappeared with a surprising amount of stealth for a man his size. Fitting his name was Devil.

But the servant’s departure seemed to suck all the air from the space. Adele was *alone* with Dominic Winter. Although she had done her utmost to prepare herself for this inevitable moment, her efforts seemed paltry as he skirted his massive desk and prowled toward her.

“Madam,” he drawled, the lone word dripping with a combination of malice and carnality that had her pulse racing. “Your reason for intruding upon my day had better be worthwhile.”

His accent was somehow lacking the unrefined edge she had expected. Either he had taught himself to ape his betters, or someone had seen to his education. Adele had imagined a ruffian who spoke with the lewd tongue of an East End pickpocket.

“Well?” he demanded when she hesitated in her response. “Have you a tongue?”

*You can do this, Adele. You must do this.*

*For Max.*

She swallowed. “Of course I do, Mr. Winter. The nature of my visit to you is personal.”

“Personal,” he repeated, sounding amused rather than irritated as he continued his approach.

Mayhap that was a boon. Not his proximity, but his tone.

“Someone beloved to me owes you a vast sum,” she said, seizing hold of her flagging mettle. “It is my understanding that you are willing to accept an alternative form of recompense.”

He stopped, leaving enough distance between them that a chaperone could not have found fault. And yet, she could not shake

the sense that his nearness was like a serpent, coiled and intent upon striking.

Awaiting the proper moment.

His lips quirked, but the chuckle he emitted held little mirth. "Who is this spineless cove, so intent upon saving his own hide that he sends a woman to barter herself rather than paying me what is due?"

Disdain dripped from his voice.

She stiffened. "He is hardly spineless. Nor am I his emissary. He has no knowledge of my visit to you today."

"Ah." The smile he gave her was feral. "The loving mistress, come to whore herself on her protector's behalf. How utterly heartwarming."

Adele did not correct his assumption. If he knew her true identity, she had no doubt this bargain she intended to strike with him would be even more disastrous. A man as callous and greedy as Dominic Winter would think nothing of using the knowledge to ruin her and bring shame upon her entire family.

If she had a prayer of continuing her deception, she needed him to assume she was her brother's lightskirt. There was no other choice.

She struggled to maintain her composure. To keep herself from thinking upon the result of her actions, should this man accept her terms. Her chest felt as if a weight had been laid upon it.

Adele sucked in one deep breath for daring. "It was my idea to aid him when he mentioned your amenity to debt cancellation with... matters of the flesh."

She had said it, though the words nearly choked her. And though the very thought of submitting herself to this man's touch made her shudder and caused her stomach to twist into knots. Everything she knew of Dominic Winter made her find him despicable.

He laughed again. The sound held no levity; instead, it was ominous, sliding over her like rough silk. "If you have come here in the belief I will accept cunny for coin, you have wasted your time, madam. Devil will see you out."

With that pronouncement, he turned on his heel, giving her his back once more, and returned to his desk. The cut was an unimaginable slight. The very notion of a duke's daughter being so ill-treated by a common criminal who had somehow swindled his way into the role he now occupied would have been laughable on any other day.

But not this one.

Adele was not amused.

Nor would she be dismissed.

Instead of meekly fleeing his lair, she followed in his wake, desperation and the memory of her brother's badly beaten face

making her bold.

Want more? Get *Winter's Wallflower* [here](#)!

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## About the Author

*USA Today* and Amazon bestselling author Scarlett Scott writes steamy Victorian and Regency romance with strong, intelligent heroines and sexy alpha heroes. She lives in Pennsylvania with her Canadian husband, adorable identical twins, and one TV-loving dog.

A self-professed literary junkie and nerd, she loves reading anything, but especially romance novels, poetry, and Middle English verse. Catch up with her on her website [www.scarlettscottauthor.com](http://www.scarlettscottauthor.com). Hearing from readers never fails to make her day.

Scarlett's complete book list and information about upcoming releases can be found at [www.scarlettscottauthor.com](http://www.scarlettscottauthor.com).

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**Woood in Winter**  
The Wicked Winters Book 7

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